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Thoughts on prayer

THOUGHTS

ON PRAYER:

ITS DUTY: ITS FORM: ITS SUBJECTS: ITS ENCOURAGEMENTS: ITS BLESSINGS.

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THOUGHTS ON PRAYER.

CHAPTER I.

PRAYER DEFINED.

In stating the nature of prayer, the question presents itself in the outset, what is it? What do we mean by prayer? Our well-known Assembly's Catechism gives a very comprehensive, and at the same time, a very clear definition: "Prayer is the offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." Prayer is not intended to inform God of anything, for he is omniscient; he knows everything already. Neither is prayer intended to move God, for he is immutable; "He is in one mind, and who can turn him?" Job xxiii. 13. Nor is prayer like a demand that we might make for the payment of a debt, for God owes us nothing; but according to the definition

just given, it is the offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ. It is not, then, the mere words of the lips; and God frequently complains of those who approach him with the lips, while their hearts are far from him. Recurring again to the definition given, we affirm that prayer is the offering up of the desires to God. Many an effectual and fervent prayer has been offered to Jehovah, when not a word was uttered. There is, however, a propriety in the use of words in prayer, as well as a manifest advantage in the practice; and moreover, we have an express precept for it: Thus spake God by Hosea: "Take with you words and turn unto the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously." Hosea xiv. 2. Hence the Holy Spirit, by a figure very common in the scriptures, which puts the effect for the cause, and the sign for the thing signified, represents the words and actions of prayer in various ways. In the book of Lamentations, it is called a *breathing:* "Hide not thine ear at my breathing." Lam. iii. 36. Prayer is undoubtedly meant in this passage. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul speaks of prayer, calling it a *groaning:* "The Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which

cannot be uttered." Rom. viii. 26. No doubt the apostle had reference here to the deep and fervent prayers of God's people. In various places in the psalms, prayer is represented by the expressions of *crying*, *lifting up the eyes*, *lifting up the soul*, *&c.* Our Lord speaks of the duty as *knocking*, *seeking*, and *asking*. In Isaiah i. 35, the duty is represented by *spreading forth the hands*, and Hosea describes it by *weeping*, saying of Jacob when wrestling with God, "He wept and made supplication." Hosea xii. 4. In other places, the duty is represented by *kneeling* and *falling down*, and is sometimes called *taking hold on God*. Such, then, is prayer, the offering up of our desires to God, whether those desires are formed into words or not.

It is proper to say here, that it is the duty of men to pray. The Evangelist says that our Lord spake a parable to this end, "That men ought always to pray and not to faint." Luke x. 1. So Paul directs that men should "pray always with all prayer," Eph. vi. 10. meaning, probably, that prayer should be offered in every situation, public and private, in secret, in the family, in the social circle, and in the sanctuary, as well as that men should be always in a praying frame; and in his

Epistle to the Philippians, Paul says explicitly, "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Phil. iv. 6. With such passages before him, no man can doubt the duty, who admits the authority of the word of God.

CHAPTER II.

THE LORD'S PRAYER.

Among the earliest instructions of our Lord to his disciples, was a directory for prayer. This was fitting, as the duty of prayer lies at the foundation of a religious life. Matthew relates that our Lord was contrasting the ostentatious display of the Pharisees, and the vain repetitions of the heathen, with the simple and retiring devotion of his true people, when he said, "Be not ye, therefore, like unto them," adding immediately a direction, "After this manner, therefore, pray ye; Our Father which art in heaven." Matt. vi. 8, 9. Luke says that our Lord rehearsed this again to his disciples in answer to their request that he would teach them to pray, and he answered, "When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven," &c. Luke xi. 2. There can be little doubt but that our Lord intended here to give to men everywhere a pattern by which to regulate their prayers; and yet it can

hardly be supposed that he intended that these words and these only, were to be used, as we often find the prayers of Christ and his disciples spoken of, yet no allusion made to this particular form of words. And in one instance at least, a prayer of Christ is recorded, occupying the entire 17th chapter of John, couched in other language throughout. It is therefore most probable that the form recited by our Lord was intended as an outline, or directory, serving to guide the desires of his people, and directing them what to ask for agreeable to his will. As in preaching, we are not to be confined to the words of scripture only, but should open and enforce them by other words, and illustrate and argue for the conviction of those who hear, so in prayer, the form taught by our Lord should be the model, but other words and arguments agreeable thereto may be used.

In considering this model for prayer, we are struck with its wonderful simplicity. Here are no high sounding epithets, neither any useless repetitions, but a plain, simple, and affectionate address, equally distant from an affected familiarity on the one hand, and fulsome flattery on the other. It was an artless address to God, as to a Father in heaven, whose

tender mercies were over all the works of his hands, and whose providential care had regard to all his creatures. How different is this from the prayers offered by some men! Either from a mistaken notion of being more acceptable to God, or from a desire to set themselves off before their fellow men, or from not duly considering and weighing the matter, they will heap up the names and titles of Jehovah in their addresses to him, very far exceeding the simplicity, which our Lord here inculcates. We may not feel bound to the use of this particular phrase, "Our Father," and nothing else, but as our Lord directs, "After this manner pray ye," let our addresses to God in prayer be plain and simple.

The next thought here suggested is concerning the proper object of prayer, and this is plainly taught us by the phrase, "Our Father in heaven." Our worship should be addressed to God alone. Our earthly fathers are not objects of worship, neither are saints or angels the objects to which we should direct our prayers; but our Father in heaven is the only being suitable for us to call upon. We do not mean to say here that the Lord Jesus Christ, and the divine Spirit, are not suitable objects of worship. They certainly are, for

they are God also; and when we attempt to pray, and address our Father in heaven, we should endeavour to conceive of the three persons in the sacred Trinity all united as one, and all bending their ear to our request, while the phrase, "who art in heaven," may remind us of the sovereign and universal authority of God, seated upon his throne in the heavens, high and lifted up.

Another important thought suggested by addressing God as a father, is, that our success in prayer depends very much on this relation. Sin has separated man from God, and as sinners we can only look on him as a consuming fire, nor is there any way that we can safely approach him but as a reconciled Father, through Christ. There is a striking allusion to this way of access to God in the third chapter of Jeremiah. God is there reproving the house of Israel and the house of Judah for their sins, and asks with great emphasis, "How shall I put thee among the children?" and when every mouth is stopped, and no answer can be found, God makes the answer himself, saying, "Thou shalt call me, My father." Jer. iii. 19. This then is the way and the only way in which we can approach acceptably unto God; we must have the feel-

ings of children, and come unto God as such. But perhaps some will ask, What are the feelings of children, which we must exercise toward God, if we would be accepted in prayer? We answer, dutiful children love their parents, and their best affections are drawn out to them as they are not to any others. Children also fear their parents, not however with a fear like that of a slave to his master, but a fear grounded in love—a fear to offend. Dutiful children will also obey their parents, and are ready to defend them. The child needs no constraint here. Let him but understand the will of his father, and he obeys it; while the property, the person, and the reputation of the parent are as dear to the child as his own. Such are some of the feelings of dutiful children, and such we must exercise towards God, if we would truly approach him in prayer, with any expectation of being heard and answered.

CHAPTER III.

THE LORD'S PRAYER CONTINUED.

That form of prayer which our Lord taught his disciples, after the manner of which they were to frame their addresses to God, consisted of an introduction, six distinct petitions, and a conclusion, or Doxology. The introduction we have considered, and the several petitions are now before us. We will consider them separately.

1. "Hallowed be thy name." By the name of God, as that term is used in the Bible, the several perfections of his character are meant, such as his sovereignty, his justice, his power, his truth, his mercy, &c. The term "to hallow" means to sanctify, to honour, or to glorify any person or thing; and hence the petition, "Hallowed be thy name," is a prayer that God would cause his perfections to shine forth, and that he would enable us and others to glorify him in all things whereby he makes himself known. This petition is placed first, probably,

to teach us, that in prayer we should seek God's glory in preference to our own wants, desiring that, whatever may become of us, God may be glorified, and the several perfections of his character may be displayed.

2. "Thy kingdom come." The phrase, "kingdom of God," and "kingdom of heaven," is often used in the scriptures, but not always in the same sense, meaning, perhaps, in one place, the gospel dispensation, and in another, the christian church, and then grace in the heart, and then again the kingdom of glory. This kingdom was revealed to God's prophet in most glowing language: "And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces, and consume all those kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever!" Daniel ii. 44. Such is the kingdom of the Messiah, for the coming of which we are here taught to pray.

The petition we are considering may relate to ourselves, to others, and to the Church of Christ on earth, for in each of these God's kingdom may come. In regard to ourselves, if we use this petition understandingly, we must truly desire that our hearts may be more

and more subdued by the power of the divine Spirit, and that the principle of holiness implanted in the heart by regeneration, may increase, until it shall issue in eternal life. In relation to others, when we say to God in prayer, "Thy kingdom come," we must desire that all men should be converted, and become the willing subjects of divine grace. And in regard to the church, we must desire the advancement of true religion in the world, and rejoice in the prospect of a time, when the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the earth.

3. "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." By the will of God we may understand either his commands, or his providence; the first of these being our rule of duty, and the second that, whereby he accomplishes his purposes; and both are to be considered, if we would say from the heart, "Thy will be done." In using this petition acceptably, several important things are implied. For example: If we sincerely say in prayer, "Thy will be done," we do in effect desire to obtain a full knowledge of God's commandments, as we cannot obey a a rule that we do not understand. When we use this petition understandingly, we desire also that God would subdue the opposition of our hearts, and bring them into subjection to

himself; and not this alone, for it implies a desire also to love his will, and a desire to perform it. Every command of God has reference to some action, and therefore, in proportion as we desire to know the command, and become reconciled to it, in the same proportion we shall desire to do it. Nor is this all, for as we use this petition, we must be understood to desire that the providences of God may be fulfilled, and thus his will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven.

4. "Give us this day our daily bread." It is worthy of special regard that our Lord directed his disciples when they prayed to seek the things of God first, and then the things pertaining to themselves, as even daily bread should not be sought in preference to the glory of the divine perfections, the coming of the Messiah's kingdom, and the subjection of everything to his will. In using this fourth petition, several important things are to be regarded. First, we are instructed by it to ask of God simply what we need of temporal blessings. We have no authority here to ask for superfluities, but merely for bread, for the mere substantials of life. We are taught, secondly, in this petition, that we are to depend on a daily providence. "Give us this day our daily bread."

A daily supply should content us. And we learn, thirdly, that what we ask of God we should solicit as a free gift. "Give us," is the direction, not lend us, nor sell us, nor yet are we to ask for these mercies as a reward of merit, but we are to ask of God to give us daily bread, of his own free mercy.

5. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." In the scriptures sin is often represented as a debt, and no one can consistently use this petition unless he feels that he has offended God. The man who considers himself blameless, on the whole, if not absolutely pure, cannot from his heart use this petition, because he does not consider himself a debtor. Such was the error of the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray. His spirit was boastful. He did not consider himself a debtor. Luke xviii. 10—12. So too the young ruler was rejected on the same account. Instead of supposing himself a debtor, he boasted of his obedience. Luke xviii. 18—21. Nor is this all, for when we use this petition, and ask God to forgive us our debts, if we are sincere we believe that he alone has power to forgive sins, and we come to him accordingly. Hence, then, we renounce every self-justifying plea, cast down the wea-

pons of our rebellion, and submit unreservedly to Christ, believing that it is his sole prerogative to say to the burdened soul, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." We are also instructed in this petition to offer the prayer under a condition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." This is a subscription on our part to God's law of pardoning. It is an acknowledgment of his right to treat us precisely as we treat others. That our Lord considered this principle of much consequence may be learned from the fact, that immediately on concluding the prayer, he stated again this principle, and enlarged upon it: "For," said he, "if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Matt. vi. 14, 15. This principle should be solemnly pondered by every man who prays.

6. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." To *tempt*, as the word is generally understood, conveys an idea altogether dissimilar to the real character of God, who, as an apostle expresses it, "cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man." James i. 13. But the general meaning of the word, as applied to Jehovah, signi-

fies to assay, or to prove. In this sense God is said to have tempted Abraham when he commanded him to sacrifice Isaac; and in this sense also every trial is a temptation, as it tends to make manifest the leading disposition of the heart; and every appointment of providence is a temptation, also, made to prove us, and thereby to see whether we will hold fast our integrity, or not. In this sense then God may be said to lead men into temptation. Against either distressing providences, or trials that might overwhelm us, we are then at liberty to pray; praying that God "would either keep us from being tempted to sin, or support and deliver us when we are tempted." So prayed our Lord in the days of his flesh; "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me." But he knew the necessity of the case, and subjoined, "If this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, thy will be done." Matt. xxvi. 39, 42.

Such is an outline of the prayer which our Lord taught his disciples, after the manner of which they were to shape their requests. If therefore, we would pray acceptably to the great Hearer of prayer, we must strive to obtain a heart-affecting view of the several perfections of his character; we must desire to

see his kingdom established on earth, and set up prosperously in the hearts of men; we must aim to have his will accomplished, both in our own hearts and in the world; at the same time our personal desires should be moderate, and we should be content with a daily supply for daily wants; we must exercise a forgiving spirit, hoping for the pardon of our sins against God in exact proportion as we forgive our fellow men; and realizing our exceeding weakness, we should offer our desires to God for strength to stand in the hour of trial. With these feelings we may hope to succeed in prayer when we approach the mercy-seat.

A concluding Doxology was appended to this prayer by our Lord, on which a remark or two should be made. "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever, Amen." By ascribing the kingdom to God we virtually renounce all others, and admit his rightful sovereignty over all things. When we ascribe power to God, we merely acknowledge as his what he shows every day that he possesses; and the ascribing of glory to him is an acknowledgment that his glory will be displayed both in the eternal salvation of his people, and in the destruction of those

that despise his name. The adding of Amen to this Doxology is an expression of earnest desire, equivalent perhaps to the phrase "So be it," showing that we trust the petitions with God most confidently, and so wind up the prayer in faith and hope. When we thus pray, and especially when we add to our prayers our fervent Amen, if we understand ourselves, and mean anything, we mean that as the things for which we pray are in God's purposes, and are revealed in his promises, so we would ask them in our prayers, and so ascribe them in our praises.*

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* Bernard's Thesaurus, nearly.

CHAPTER IV.

SECRET PRAYER.

Our Lord was very particular in everything that related to the advancement of religion in the souls of men, and while he passed over in silence the formal round of Jewish ceremonies, he noticed things of apparently small moment, by which the life of religion is maintained in the soul, and communion kept up between heaven and earth. Among these directions we have his precepts for secret prayer, a duty which lies at the foundation of all religion in the other departments of life. "When thou prayest," said he, "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly." Matt. vi. 6. Many conclusive arguments can be stated in favour of this duty, and to these we will first attend. Five principal arguments may be named:

1. The command of Christ. The words just now recited are plain and positive, and

must bind the conscience of every one who bows humbly to the authority of Jesus Christ.

2. The example of Christ affords another weighty argument for this duty. It is related of him by one Evangelist that having sent away his disciples, and the multitude, "he went up into a mountain apart to pray; and when the evening was come, he was there alone." Matt. xiv. 23. Another Evangelist says that "in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." Mark i. 35. And a third Evangelist states that after the miraculous draught of fishes, and the healing of a leprous man, our Lord "withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed." Luke v. 18. A similar record is made in another place, where it is stated that "he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." Luke vi. 12. To these testimonials we may add his fervent cries to God in the garden of Gethsemane; where none but the angels, God's ministering spirits, witnessed his agony, and bore report to heaven of his bitter groans. These examples of the Saviour form a powerful argument, and those who are solicitous to follow him in all that is imitable will feel their obligation to retire from the world like their

divine Master, and pour out their souls in prayer to Him whose eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.

3. A third argument in favour of secret prayer is, that every person has secret sins to confess, secret wants to urge, and secret mercies to acknowledge. Every person who truly knows himself will be conscious of sins which are completely hidden from the world—sins that he would not reveal to his nearest friend; and yet in secret prayer the heart of the truly contrite soul will be laid open before God, and every transgression will be spread out at his feet: yea, the penitent in secret will often go out into particulars respecting his sins, such as he would not dare to breathe before the world. In secret also the praying soul will urge his peculiar wants, and plead with God as a man pleadeth with his friend. There may be circumstances in his case which he could not divulge before any mortal, but before God every screen is withdrawn. A place and a time for private devotion is also needed that the thankful soul may acknowledge mercies received. Often indeed will he do this publicly, and call on the saints as David did, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul." Psalm lxvi. 16. But he will do this

more especially in private. When no mortal eye can see him, and no mortal ear can hear his voice, the grateful convert will lift up his soul to the Lord, in the highest ascriptions of praise.

4. Another argument for this duty is that God appears to be specially pleased with the secret prayers of his people. There is one very pertinent passage to this effect in the Song of Solomon: "O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." Sol. Song ii. 14. Thus does Christ encourage the young convert to improve communion with him in secret devotion, urging as a motive his delight in the service.

5. One other argument for secret prayer remains to be stated: God will reward openly the secret prayers of his people. So he has promised, and he will make it good. It is done in two ways: First, by an increase of grace, and second, by having the things prayed for. Those who pray much in secret are generally distinguished from others by an exemplary and holy life. As Moses, when he had been long in the mount with God, exhibited a radi-

ance on his countenance, the very "skin of his face shone," Exodus xxxiv. 29, so the pious, praying soul, shines in the duties of his holy profession. When we see a person shining in christian knowledge and grace, increasing in a spiritual acquaintance with the scriptures, edifying in christian conversation, and ready always to speak for God and his cause; if we could follow that person home, we should most assuredly find him constant in secret prayer; we should find him taking all proper opportunities to steal away from the world, and hold communion with Him who seeth in secret. And on the other hand, whenever we see a person dull and spiritless in holy things, ignorant and backsliding, having but little spiritual understanding of the scriptures, conformed to the world, and making an uneven and irregular walk; if we follow this man home, we shall find that he seldom, if ever, prays in secret. So clearly does God reward the praying soul, and punish the prayerless. Nor is this all, for he rewards the duty by frequently granting the things prayed for. Whether secret prayers are more generally answered than other prayers, we may not be able to determine, but it is very clear, that some of the most remarkable answers to prayer

recorded in the Bible, were answers to prayer offered in secret. The prayers of Jacob at Bethel were secret prayers. It was night, and he was alone in the field, and here he called on God, and had visions of the Most High, and God heard his cries, and fulfilled his request, keeping him in the way that he went, and bringing him in safety back to his father's house. And when he was returning homeward, and wrestled all night in prayer with the great angel of the covenant, he was alone, and no mortal eye beheld, nor ear heard, as he wept, and made supplication to Jehovah, and the Lord blessed him there. Gen. xxviii. 10–17; xxxii. 24–30. Hosea xii. 4, 5.

The very prevalent prayers of Moses, and of Samuel, when they stood in the breach, and prevailed in turning away the wrath of God from Israel, were both secret prayers. Ex. xxxii. 11–14. 1 Sam. vii. 8, 9. So the prayers of Elijah, when he raised the widow's son, were offered in secret; for he took the lifeless body of the child from his mother, and carried him up into the loft where he abode, and there prayed; and when he prayed for rain, after the drought had scorched the land for three years and an half, he was alone, having separated himself from his servant, with

his face to the ground. 1 Kings xvii. 17–23; xviii. 42–45. So, too, the prayers of Elisha were uttered in secret, when he raised the son of the Shunammite. The dead child had been carried by his mother, and laid on the prophet's bed, and when Elisha came to the house, "he went in and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord," and God hearkened and heard, and the soul of the child returned, and Elisha delivered him alive to his mother. 2 Kings iv. 32–37. In like manner, the prayers of Peter were uttered in secret, when he raised Tabitha to life. When he found a great company of "saints and widows" bemoaning her death, it is expressly said that he "put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed, and turning him to the body, said, Tabitha, arise! And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up." Acts ix. 40. The prayers of Daniel, which were so prevalent with God, that the angel Gabriel was sent from heaven to instruct him and bring answers of peace, appear also to have been offered in secret. Dan. viii. 15–19; ix. 3–23.

Thus the command of Christ, the example of Christ, the opportunity thus afforded for secret confession, urging secret wants, and

acknowledging secret mercies; the delight that God takes in such prayers, and his promise to reward them openly: these things all present strong arguments for the duty of secret prayer.

Presuming that the arguments thus stated are conclusive, the inquiry will very naturally arise for some directions for the suitable performance of the duty.

How often must we pray in secret? is perhaps the first question that will arise. On this point the scripture is silent. It only says that the prayer in question must be secret. The examples in the Bible have varied. David appears to have prayed very often, "Seven times a day do I praise thee," says he. Psalm cxix. 164. Probably a definite time is named here for an indefinite one, meaning that he prayed very often. In another place he names certain times of prayer, saying, "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud; and he shall hear my voice." Psalm lv. 17. Daniel prayed thrice every day. This is the record of him: "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed [*i. e.* the wicked decree forbidding any one to pray for thirty days], he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon

his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime." Daniel vi. 10. This shows his practice. If we look at the example of our Lord, we shall only find that he prayed in secret, and prayed much, but no more definite information can be obtained. Thus, as there is no direct precept on this subject to inform us precisely how often we should pray in secret, there seems a propriety in saying that the duty should be performed at least daily, as every day brings with it sins to confess, wants to urge, and mercies to acknowledge.

Another question which arises, regards the time for secret prayer; shall it be morning, or noon, or night, or all, or any of them? Here also the scripture is silent, giving no precept as to the time, intimating thereby that the precise time for the performance of the duty is immaterial. It is undoubtedly proper that some of our best time should be devoted to this duty; that those seasons should be chosen which are most free from cares and business, when the mind is least perplexed, and the body least exhausted, and heavy through fatigue and sleep. A personwill easily discover what part of the day his mind and body are in the best state for serious thought

and meditation, and let him select that time for intercourse with "the Father of spirits." Having thus found the best time for secret prayer, there is a manifest advantage in being as punctual as possible to that time every day, notwithstanding what some may say about formality. In all things we are very much the creatures of habit, and a habit of doing right, and of performing our duty, should be cultivated daily. Then as the stated hour of prayer returns, our minds will revert to it, business will be made to conform to that hour, and some system and regularity will be secured in devotion as well as in other things.

One question more will probably arise in relation to this matter: What are the most proper subjects for secret prayer? These will necessarily be as various as the people who pray. The only general rule which can be given in relation to this subject is, that all things pertaining to the individual alone, should be spread out in secret before God, and never introduced in public. In the closet, every secret of the heart should be laid open, and we may there go into particulars, and name individual cases, both our own and others, and make disclosures, which would be manifestly improper in any public assembly, or even in

the family. And we may just remark here, in passing, that there are some advantages from the use of words in secret prayer. It is true that God sees the heart, and regards especially the thoughts and dispositions of the soul; and it is also true that acceptable prayer may be offered where no sound is uttered; and as we move about in the world from day to day, such an intercourse with heaven may and ought to be maintained; yet, when we retire to our closets for secret devotion, the use of words serves to keep the mind regular, as well as to awaken more feeling.

CHAPTER V.

FAMILY PRAYER.

The duty of calling on God does not end with individual or private devotion, but is extended to families, to the social circle, and to the public assembly; and it is proper that we consider it in these connections. The mingling of two or more individuals constitutes the family, where prayer should be offered; and we will consider the duty in this relation.

Many arguments might be stated in favour of family prayer, of which the following are a few of the most prominent:

1. The erection of families, and the constant recognition of this relation in the scriptures, furnish a strong argument why God should be worshipped there. Families are of divine appointment. One of the first acts of Jehovah after he had made the world, was to constitute a family. "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make an helpmeet for him." Gen. ii. 18. So

the woman was created, and a family was established, and God blessed the family as he did his other works, and pronounced it very good.

When the world was destroyed by a flood of waters, God preserved not an individual alone, but a family, and even a part of that family were ungodly people. Gen. ix. 25. And so when Sodom was destroyed, Lot's family were brought forth, though himself only was righteous before God. Gen. xix. 12–16. So in the blessing of God upon Abraham, his family were included; and in New Testament times, the families of the jailor at Philippi, of Lydia, of Stephanus, and others, are recognized in their family capacity as receiving blessings from God. Acts xvi. 15, 31–33. 1 Cor. i. 16. A weighty argument may be raised from all this, for the propriety of worshipping God in the family circle.

2. The duties arising from the family state, furnish another argument for family prayer; and here a single thing shall be named. The right education of children depends very much on the stated performance of this duty. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Prov. xxii. 6. These words of Solomon are

in accordance with those of Paul, "Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Eph. vi. 3. There is no way so effectual in which a right turn may be given to children in early life as to go before them in the duty of family prayer. Example is always better than precept, and we may rest assured that no child will be urged to the duty of prayer by a parent who neglects that duty himself. With what face can any man urge religion upon his household, while his own practice is in opposition to the course he points out to them? And may they not justly retort upon him in the language of an apostle, "Thou that teachest another, teachest not thou thyself?" Rom. ii. 21. Thus by the neglect of family prayer, the neglect of other duties follows, more especially the instruction of children; but where prayer is maintained, this is seldom omitted.

3. Another argument in favour of this duty is found in the consideration, that all families have particular mercies to acknowledge, and particular wants to make known. Sickness, or death, or trouble, or affliction of various kinds, may make the case of a family peculiar, and call for such supplication as might not be consistently delayed till the public as-

sembly, or might be improper to be brought there, or some mercy may call for acknowledgment during the recess of public worship, which might demand more notice than closet devotion affords; and hence the importance of a family altar on which such offerings may be laid.

4. We derive a fourth argument for family prayer from the examples of good men recorded in the Bible. The example of Job is a striking one. It is said that he rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt sacrifices for each of his sons, accompanying them no doubt with his prayers; and lest it should be thought that this was only an occasional service, it is added, "Thus did Job continually." Job i. 5. It is hardly supposable that this good man would enter on such a course as a fixed habit without making it a family concern. It is said of David also that after having worshipped God in the sanctuary, he returned to his family to perform the same duty there. Chron. xvi. 43. In the Gospel history we have the example of our Lord stated: "And it came to pass, that as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." Luke xi. 1. The disci-

ples of our Lord constituted his family, and though not long resident in any one place, yet they were a family, with whom, as the head, Jesus prayed as opportunity presented, and gave thanks for their food, leaving us in these things an example, that we should follow his steps. In the history given us of Paul, we have another striking example of family worship, in connection with some account of a damsel possessed with a spirit of divination. The sacred writer says, "The same followed Paul and us, as we went to prayer, and this she did many days." Acts xvi. 16—18. It appears from the whole account that without the city of Philippi, on the bank of a river, probably in some retired spot, there was a place for prayer, and thither the apostle and his companions, with a few pious women, were in the practice of resorting for daily prayer. The possessed damsel seems to have known that they went out to this place daily, and at a set hour, and took that opportunity to disturb their devotions. Now there is a strong probability that this was family prayer. It might indeed have been a prayer-meeting; but look at the circumstances; it was performed daily—it was attended at a set hour—Paul and his companions were then inmates in the

family of Lydia, who, with her household, attended on the service. Let it also be considered that it was a time of fierce persecution, when to pray was thought a crime, and when christians sought retirement and secrecy that they might worship God without giving offence. When these considerations are duly weighed, a strong probability appears that this daily prayer "at the river's side," was the family worship of Lydia's household, conducted for a time by Paul and his companions.

5. A last argument to be stated in proof of the duty of family prayer, is the light reflected from three texts of scripture. The first is in Jeremiah x. 25, "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name." This is the prayer of the church under affliction, beseeching God that if his judgments must fall, they may fall on those who know him not, or who, knowing, do not worship him. The prayerless family is thus exposed to ruin; a powerful motive to perform the duty.

The second scripture proof is found in the construction of the Lord's prayer, "Our Father," &c., plainly implying that more than one person is present; and yet it is to be used

every day, "Give us this day our daily bread." It is not the duty to assemble in the sanctuary every day, neither to meet for a prayer-meeting every day; but in the family they may and ought to worship daily, and in that capacity may say with propriety, "Our Father—give us this day our daily bread."

A third text in proof of this duty, is 1 Peter iii. 7, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." Here we observe that the apostle exhorts husbands to behave with kindness and fidelity to their wives, rendering them due honour, duly considering the weakness and delicacy of their frame, adding as a reason, "That your prayers be not hindered." This must refer to family prayer, as none other will apply. Family quarrels could not prevent a person from praying in secret, neither from going to the sanctuary, nor to a prayer-meeting, but family prayer might, and probably would be disturbed, and perhaps be prevented altogether by quarrels between a man and his wife.

When we thus consider the divine institution of families, and the duties which naturally

grow out of that state; when we consider that all families have at times special wants to urge, and mercies to acknowledge; when we consider the example of holy men of old, as well as the direct testimony of the word of God, the weight of argument for the duty must be allowed to be very convincing.

In addition to the direct arguments in favour of family prayer, there are some peculiar advantages of the duty. We name two. 1. It will make men lead more godly lives. No man can run so easily into sin during the day, who has in the morning prayed with his family. It will make him watchful over his conduct. He will feel that the eyes of his family are upon him, and that they will notice his inconsistency if he walks irregularly. Infidelity itself always pays one tribute to christianity; that is, to confess its purity, and to declare that it cannot consist with a wicked life; and hence every man knows that, when he departs from correct practice on any point where the gospel precepts are plain, he will forfeit his character with the world. These considerations will impress the mind of a man who establishes prayer in his family, for he will very soon leave off to sin, or leave off to pray.

A second advantage of the duty of family worship is, that it gives weight to parental authority, and greatly assists a man in the government of his family. By daily assembling the family, and uniting with them in supplication to the Author of all mercy, parents obtain an ascendency over the minds of children and domestics, which they could hardly obtain in any other way. The holiness which their characters assume, and the dignified stand which they thus take, as a priest in their house, gives them a consequence in the sight of their families, which is almost indispensable, either for instruction or reproof.

Having, as we think, established the duty of maintaining family worship, it seems proper to give a few directions for its more orderly performance. Many of these directions will readily suggest themselves to the mind of every devout and thoughtful man, such as the place where, the subject matter, and the manner of the duty. A few other things may be named.

When shall the duty be performed? Morning and evening seem to be suitable seasons, and are recognized as such in the Bible. God directed Moses to make an altar for the burning of incense, and commanded thus: "And

Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning; when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at even, he shall burn incense upon it; a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations." Exod. xxx. 7, 8. This service very strikingly shadowed forth morning and evening prayer; for though the priest only was concerned in the tabernacle, yet it was the custom for the whole multitude to be praying without at the time of the offering of the incense. Luke i. 10.

But we have another text still more to the purpose. Among the special commands of God to Moses, and through him to the people, we have the following: "Now this is that which thou shalt offer upon the altar: two lambs of the first year day by day continually. The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning, and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even." Exod. xxix. 38, 39. This very strikingly exhibits the morning and evening sacrifice of the family; and to testify the delight which he took in the service God was pleased to add, "This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle before the Lord; when I will

meet with you, to speak there unto thee. And there will I meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory."

Daily sacrifice is often mentioned in the scriptures. Thus the psalmist: "So will I sing praise to thy name for ever, that I may daily perform my vows." Psalm lxi. 8. So Wisdom: "Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates." Prov. viii. 34. So the prophet: "Thou shalt daily prepare a burnt offering unto the Lord, of a lamb of the first year without blemish; thou shalt prepare it every morning." Ezekiel xlvi. 13. Daniel mentioned the evening as a stated time of prayer, calling it "the evening oblation," when the angel Gabriel came to him with a divine communication. Dan. ix. 21.

From these testimonies, it seems plain that morning and evening are suitable times for family worship; and in addition to these, it should be considered, that in the morning we need the blessing of God on our lawful undertakings through the day, as well as his aid and direction; and that at night we need his forgiveness of sins committed, and his presence and protection while we sleep. It seems proper to add that family prayers should not

be protracted to an immoderate length, as the service, returning as it does every morning and evening, might in that case become tiresome to the younger members of the family; but if short, and direct to the subject in hand, it would be a pleasant duty in which all would readily join. And may we not very properly suggest here, that the evening prayers of a family should be attended at an early hour, before the younger members of the family shall have retired to rest, and before he who is to lead in the duty, shall have become dull and heavy through fatigue and sleep?

One more direction is important. If practicable, let every member of the family, children and domestics, attend the family devotions. If it is a duty to worship God in the family, that duty is binding on every member of the family; and if it is viewed as a privilege thus to worship God, every one should share the blessing. The domestic arrangements of every family should be made with reference to this duty, so that every person in the house may have opportunity to bow down at the family altar.

The arguments for family prayer have thus been stated, some advantages of the duty

spoken of, and some directions for its orderly performance given. Direct objections to the duty we believe will not be urged, but some excuses may possibly be made by those who neglect it, which we will endeavour to remove. The excuses made by those who neglect family prayer are usually these four, viz:

1. "I have no time." And pray what was time made for but to serve God, and prepare for eternity? Those who are in easy worldly circumstances, can surely afford time for the daily worship of God with their families; and if any are poor, and need to work very diligently and very laboriously to support their families, they may rest assured that disobedience to God's known commands will not increase their earnings. "The blessing of God maketh rich," and he would not be likely to withhold his blessing from those who uprightly sought his favour. Let observation test this. Where is the man who makes conscience of offering the morning and evening sacrifice of prayer and praise in his family, improving with diligence the remainder of the day, who is not a thriving man? And on the contrary, wherever we find a slothful man, always behind hand, and bringing but little to pass, follow that man home, and you will almost invariably

find that he does not pray with his family. Activity and diligence in business is far more usually connected with fervency of spirit in religious things, than with its opposite.

2. "I have no grace, I cannot pray with my family," says the man, "because I am not converted." The sincerity of this excuse may be somewhat doubted, but admitting it as sincere, it may be answered that one sin will not excuse another, and we deceive ourselves when we rely on any claim that we could not make at the bar of God. You say you are not converted. Admit this to be the fact, what prevents it? And who is to blame in the case? Hear, for a moment, the words of a prophet, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, neither is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." Isaiah lix. 1, 2. It is sin, and that alone, which forms the barrier between man and his Maker, and while this is held fast, men are criminal. The excuse, I have no grace, rebounds upon the sinner; for it is as much as to say, I love sin, and I will not give it up that I may perform a duty which God requires.

3. "I have no gifts." This excuse would be of weight to one who had not the use of speech,

but to no other. As it regards prayer in the sanctuary, or in the social circle, gifts are to be consulted, as they are of some importance; and in the family, gifts are desirable, but not indispensable. All that is absolutely necessary is a knowledge of our wants and a power to express them. This the most ignorant man possesses. If he is hungry, or thirsty, or in pain, or in trouble of any kind, he finds no difficulty in making it known to his neighbour. This is all that is absolutely needful in family prayer. God, who knows the secret sigh, well knows the groaning of the contrite heart, and although the duty be performed in ever so broken a manner, he will accept, and graciously answer it.

4. When driven from every other hold, the man who neglects family prayer, has usually in reserve one more excuse: "I am so diffident," he will say, "that I could not go through with the duty." Did you ever try? Probably there was never yet a person who, having summoned his family, and read a portion of scripture, and then attempted to pray, could not succeed. Where there is a willing mind, God will bestow proportionate strength; and often a duty commenced with very great trembling, is, by the grace of God, made lighter and lighter, till it becomes pleasant and delightful.

CHAPTER VI.

SOCIAL PRAYER.

When we speak of social prayer, or "prayer meetings," the question will immediately come up, whether there is any scriptural authority for such services. It is readily allowed that we have no explicit command for this duty. For many other duties there is in the Bible a plain, "Thus saith the Lord." For secret prayer, family prayer, and public prayer in the sanctuary, the commands are explicit, and no man can neglect either of them and be guiltless; but in relation to social prayer-meetings there is not a distinct command, and a man may walk acceptably to God who attends no meeting for social prayer. We have no right therefore to judge any man in relation to this duty, much less to condemn him, as we might if he neglected prayer in his closet, in his family, or in the sanctuary. The loss would be his own, and it would be a serious loss both of comfort and edification; but he

might be a true child of God notwithstanding. While we make this admission, we think it can be clearly shown that we have authority for holding such meetings, and that there is a manifest advantage in attending them.

The authority for social prayer-meetings may be gathered from three sources, viz:

1. Christ engages his blessing upon such meetings by granting the requests made there. "If two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." Matt. xviii. 19. So runs the promise. Now although an agreement in prayer might be made and carried into effect by two or more persons in their closets, separated from each other, yet it is far more natural to suppose such persons coming together, and with a joint voice presenting their petitions to God. Had not our Lord approved of such meetings, we have no reason to suppose he would have promised to hear and answer such joint requests.

2. Christ promises his presence in meetings for social prayer. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matt. xviii. 20. A similar promise was given by our Lord to his disciples just before his ascension to glory; "Go

ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature—and lo, I am with you alway." Matt. xxviii. 20. Did not our Lord in thus engaging his presence to his disciples give his approbation to their going forth? And when he engages his presence where two or three are assembled in his name, does he not sanction such a meeting? And did he not make good his word to his early disciples by granting his personal presence repeatedly to a little company of them as they met for social worship, a few days after his resurrection? John xx. 19, and 26.

3. The examples on sacred record are another source from which we derive authority for holding meetings for social prayer. Daniel and his three pious companions were brought into great straits when the wicked King of Babylon demanded of them the revelation of a dream that he had forgotten, under penalty of death. Prayer was their immediate resort, when Daniel made known the case. They might indeed have prayed each in his closet, but from the manner in which the thing is related, it seems more probable that they prayed together, and God hearkened and heard, and the thing was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Dan. ii. 17, 18. We have another ex-

ample in the conduct of our Lord's disciples. As soon as they saw him ascend up where he was before, and watched him until a cloud received him out of their sight, they assembled immediately for a prayer-meeting, and continued the duty daily, until the day of Pentecost came, and thousands were converted. Acts i. 13, 14. When Peter was confined in prison by Herod, the disciples offered constant prayer for him, assembling together for this purpose. Acts xii. 12. The prophet Zechariah records a most striking prediction concerning this matter, even an express agreement to hold meetings for prayer. "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord." Zech. viii. 20—22.

Considering these and several other examples, and considering that Christ engages his presence where his people assemble, are we not safe in the assertion that there is full authority in the scriptures for holding meetings for social prayer?

But this duty is not only fully authorized, but has many peculiar advantages, of which we will recite a few.

1. Meetings for social prayer are useful to express mutual wants. There is a fellowship in feeling drawn forth in a meeting for social prayer, which is not ordinarily felt in other situations. The wants of one are embraced in the petitions of all, and a fellowship excited altogether becoming those who hope at last to mingle around the throne.

2. Meetings for social prayer, especially when joined, as they usually are, with some conference, serve to strengthen the weak, and confirm the wavering. "As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." Prov. xxvii. 19. When the poor, tempted, doubting christian hears others express the same doubts that he feels himself; when he hears them address God in the same broken manner that he himself does, and finds them exposed to the same temptations, he is strengthened, and encouraged. The strong thus bear the infirmities of the weak, and both are assisted.

3. In attending social meetings for prayer, christians drink into the same spirit. Not unfrequently the warmth of one will be com-

municated to the whole, and a lively and zealous christian will arouse others, and the holy flame kindling from heart to heart will burn with an ardour which each alone would never have felt. As embers when separated on the hearth will die, but when brought together will communicate heat to each other, and presently kindle into a flame, so it is with christians. A solitary individual, though truly pious, will be very likely to become dull and spiritless; but let him be brought into a praying circle, and he will soon be invigorated, and catching the spirit of his more zealous brethren, will soar upward as on the wings of the winds. So useful it is for christians to come together and pray.

4. Love to God and each other is much increased among christians by meeting for social prayer. The man who prays devoutly in any situation will lose sight of worldly objects, and will mount upward, till, his spiritual vision becoming clear, heaven will almost be presented without a veil; and as christians pray together, they will pray for each other, and praying thus they will feel more for each other, and thus when one member suffers all will suffer with it. Thus love is excited, and those who are accustomed to pray together will be distin-

guished for their spirituality in the things of God, and for their affection toward each other. Other advantages might be named, such as the following: meetings for social prayer bring into action that great diversity of gifts with which christians are endowed; they promote mutual instruction; they cause and strengthen serious impressions; they are highly rational; they excite to more prayer in every department of it; they tend to mutual edification; they are highly favourable to christian enjoyment, and they have been greatly blessed by the Holy Spirit.*

The authority for holding meetings for social prayer being established, and the advantages of attending them stated, it remains that we give a few directions for the more orderly conducting them.

As a great variety of gifts exists in the church, God having placed them there for the edification of the body, room should be allowed for the exercise of the whole. Some men are strong and have brilliant gifts, while others are weak and their gifts small, but we should no more exclude the small gift, nor despise the single talent, than we should exclude the foot

* See these advantages drawn out at length in Pond's "Apology for Religious Conferences," published at Worcester, Mass. in 1817, pages 17 to 22.

from the body because it is not the hand, nor the eye because it is not the ear. The members of Christ's body are all dependent on each other, and even the feeble are necessary, and all should be employed. 1 Cor. xii. 14—31.

In meetings for social prayer many subjects will naturally come in, and care should be taken to have no unnecessary interference of topics, and if one is disposed of by the brother who leads first, let those that come after select others. So did the primitive disciples; one had a psalm, another a doctrine, another an interpretation, and all was done to edifying. 1 Cor. xiv. 26—33.

In meetings for social worship where it is expected that many should take part, the prayers should be direct and short. If but one or two prayers were expected, then perhaps men would be justified in covering with their supplications a larger space; but if, as is more usually the case, from three to six persons are expected in turn to lead the devotions of the assembly, then it is more edifying that a very few topics be selected by each, and their petitions be confined mainly to these topics, and the whole be comprised in such brief limits as that none should tire, and wish the prayer at an end.

CHAPTER VII.

PUBLIC PRAYER.

Public worship is a matter of vast importance. Anciently God promised his presence and his blessing in the sanctuary, and to this day he performs that promise to his people. This is the promise, "In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee." Exodus xx. 24. In accordance with this promise, the Shechinah, or visible glory of the Lord, always appeared on the Tabernacle in the wilderness, where God had recorded his name, and every communication to the ancient church was made there. Hence the people of that day were explicitly commanded not to offer their burnt offerings in every place, but to bring them all to the door of the Tabernacle. In conformity to this, as soon as Joshua had led the people into the promised land, the Tabernacle was set up in Shiloh, and all the words of the Lord were there made known. When the temple was

built at Jerusalem, the visible presence of the Lord was removed there. The record of the transaction is striking: "And it came to pass when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord." 1 Kings viii. 10, 11. And when we trace along the history of the church from its commencement, we shall find that the most signal displays of God's glory have been made in his sanctuary, thus conferring a peculiar honour upon public worship, and setting his seal to it as an institution of his own appointment. Here he meets with his people, here he dispenses his favours, and here, as of old, he communes with his saints from off his mercy-seat. We have not to go up to Shiloh, we have not to travel to Jerusalem, but now, wherever there is a worshipping assembly, there is the house of God, there is the gate of heaven. Well did God, the Holy Ghost, say by David concerning the sanctuary, "This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell, for I have desired it." Psalm cxxxii. 14.

Public prayer is the most important part of the worship of the sanctuary. "My house,"

said God, "shall be called the house of prayer." Isaiah lvi. 7, & Matt. xxi. 13. It is emphatically so. It is here that people should come to pray, and it would be the sanctuary, the house of prayer, though a sermon were never preached in it. The inquiry is then an important one, how are we to view public prayer and how conduct it, that it may best subserve God's glory, and our own good?

1. Public prayer is to be viewed as a matter in which we are personally interested. Many are apt to consider the prayers offered in public as pertaining mainly to the minister, and they listen very civilly, and perhaps devoutly, but after all, it is more to hear the minister pray than to pray themselves. But this is an error. Prayer is a personal thing, and whether offered in the social meeting or the sanctuary, it should be considered as an individual matter. Every one should come here to pray, and the one who leads the devotions, should be considered merely as the mouth of others. Hence,

2. In prayers where many are joining, whether it be in the social meeting or the public sanctuary, no unsuitable matter should be introduced, much less anything that can divide the feeling; and he who leads the devotions, should be careful so to frame his language that

the audience can consistently give their assent to every petition. The prayers offered in public by some men are sometimes filled with doctrinal instruction, or with exhortations, both intended for those around them, yet offered to God as petitions; and even reproofs are sometimes administered in this way, and arrows are shot upward with an intention that they should come down. Any one who will reflect on this, must see that there is great impropriety in the practice. The grand design of all prayer is to express to God in a humble, earnest, and yet simple manner, the desires and emotions of the heart. Doctrinal instruction, exhortation, and reproof, are all proper in their place, but public prayer is not the place for them. Neither should matters relating to individuals or families, be brought into public prayer, unless it is specially requested, or some peculiar circumstances call for it. We should give to every thing its proper place. In secret, we may freely disclose before God every thought of the heart; in the family, the things pertaining to that relation may be introduced; but in the social circle, and in public, the petitions should be such as all can join in without confusion of thought, or division of feeling.

3. In public prayer there should be felt

and exhibited the deepest reverence, insomuch that there should be a cautious use made of the names, titles, attributes, and perfections of Jehovah. We should never be unmindful that we are on earth, and that God is in heaven; that we are unholy and sinful, and he pure and spotless; and therefore that our words should be well chosen, the most simple, direct, and unincumbered language being on all accounts the proper style of prayer. Jehovah is a great King, and therefore in our most endearing addresses, we should not fail to reverence the fearful name of the Lord our God.

4. Deep thought should characterize all public prayers. The words of prayer should come from a composed heart, and not be the result of sudden heat or passion. The direction of Solomon is in point: "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God." Eccl. v. 2. When we speak to Jehovah in prayer, we should be cautious not to utter anything crude and undigested. How should we reprove the man who, having a petition to present to the ruler of the land, or to the congress of the nation, should burst into the audience chamber, and talk away at random in the

most familiar and unmannerly style! We should expect, of course, that he would disgust those he addressed, and utterly fail in his application. Far more improper is it for us to rush into the presence of God, and utter ourselves to him without thought.

5. Prayer is no place for a man to play the orator, and to launch out into fine speaking; and it is perfectly disgusting to hear a man pray who is evidently labouring to display his learning, his ingenuity, or his orthodoxy. We sometimes hear prayers commended as fine specimens of eloquence, commendations utterly out of place; for true prayer does not consist in beautiful language, and finely turned periods, but in the offering up of our desires to God, for such things as we need; and this is always more acceptable to the pious mind—listening and joining in it—when couched in plain and humble language. Equally improper is a studied attempt at variety and originality in prayer, which is sometimes apparent in those who lead in public devotions. Some seem to imagine that they must never use the same expression twice, and will use as much effort to vary their language in prayer, and to make it beautiful, and classical, and logical, and original, as if they were addressing an audi-

ence of mortals, and not the great Hearer of prayer. This is manifestly wrong. It is Jehovah who is addressed in prayer, and a sense of his presence should make us afraid of anything calculated for a mere effect on an auditory, when we are addressing the majesty of high heaven. When, therefore, we are the mouth of others in prayer, as in a public assembly, or in a more private circle, it is important, for the edification of the whole, that nothing should be said calculated to divide and distract the feeling of the audience; and thus far the language of prayer should be studied, and the speaker should not allow himself to use expressions wounding to the feelings of any, or even questionable in their allusions; much less should he use objectionable language, or any expressions which may lead those who are professedly joining in prayer, to leave off praying themselves, in order to gaze after him, and see where he will come out. All such improprieties should be avoided by those who lead in public prayer.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POWER OF PRAYER.

One striking characteristic of prayer, as offered by the renewed people of God, is its wonderful power. This was exemplified in the case of many holy men of old. As they prayed, they had power with God and did prevail. We are not to infer hence that man is stronger than God: so far from it he is in himself a weak and miserable creature. But in great condescension God endows him with spiritual power, and enables him to become prevalent at the mercy-seat. We shall understand this better by looking at a few scriptural examples. Abraham's prayer for Sodom furnishes one very striking example of the power of a praying man with God. Jehovah had revealed to the patriarch his purpose of destroying the wicked city, for, as he said, he would not hide from Abraham the thing that he was about to do. The holy man was greatly moved at the communication, and when the heavenly messen-

ger left him, he was reluctant to leave the place, but "stood yet before the Lord," and gave himself to prayer. "And Abraham drew near and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Gen. xviii. 23—25. What an example is here! Here is a holy man pleading for the lives of a most wicked people. And see what arguments he uses. He addressed the justice and the righteousness of God, and besought him not to tarnish these bright perfections by an indiscriminate destruction. His prayer was prevalent: he had power with God, and prevailed. "And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." Gen. xviii. 26. Again the holy patriarch humbled himself before God, and addressing his mercy plead for the devoted place, continuing his supplication until he obtained the promise of the Lord, so that had ten righteous men been found

in Sodom, that wicked city might have remained till this day. Such is the power of prayer.

We have another example of the power of prayer in the case of Jacob, when he was returning homeward to his country and his kindred after his long exile in Padan-aram. When Jacob left his home, Esau had threatened his life, and though twenty years had passed, his wrath was still burning, and gathering four hundred armed men he was marching forward to wreak his vengeance on the defenceless family. With large and princely gifts, arranged with much wisdom, Jacob sought to appease his brother, and open a way into his favour for himself and his family. But he did not rest on these. He knew a throne of grace, and rested his cause on a power more than human. As he journeyed on, just at evening he came to a small river or brook, which could be forded by the flocks, and sent them over. His wives and children were then safely passed over the ford, but Jacob tarried behind to pray. The account of this is most graphically described. "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him, until the breaking of the day." Gen. xxxii. 24—29. A figurative expression is used—that of wrestling, but prayer was doubtless intended, and stripped of all

drapery, we are here presented with a striking example of a holy man of God engaged in prayer, making earnest supplication, with strong crying and tears, and persevering therein until an answer came: while the Being with whom he wrestled was the Messiah, the great Angel of the covenant, anticipating his incarnation. In close encounter the struggle proceeded until the patriarch prevailed. "Let me go," said the holy Being, "let me go, for the day breaketh;" but Jacob persisted, saying, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." And God blessed him there. He was knighted on the field, as men sometimes express it; a mark of honour was put upon him, and in the change of his name to Israel a title was given him to stand till the end of time. He was no longer Jacob, a supplanter, but Israel, a prince; he was a prince who had power with God, and was destined to prevail. Such again is the power of prayer.

Another instructive example of the power of prayer is that of Moses. The people had sinned in making the golden calf, and the anger of the Lord waxed hot against them; but Moses gave himself unto prayer. "Let me alone," said God, "that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation." Ex-

odus xxxii. 10. But Moses would not desist, but continued to urge his suit, founding his argument on the truth of God, who had bound himself by covenant to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. The argument was prevalent, and the power of prayer was manifest. The psalmist thus regarded it: "Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen stood before him in the breach, to turn away his wrath, lest he should destroy them." Psalm cvi. 23.

From these examples we learn the power of prayer, and from this consideration we should be induced to engage oftener and more heartily in the duty. Would we obtain the favour of God unto life eternal, we should spread out our cause at the mercy-seat, and rest not until we obtain the blessing.

CHAPTER IX.

PLEADING IN PRAYER.

When Job was suffering under the pressure of Jehovah's hand, and at the same time accused by his friends of the basest hypocrisy; forsaken as he seemed to be by all the world, he determined no more to appeal to any human tribunal, but laid open his case before God. His language was that of distress: "Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments." Job xxiii. 3, 4.

Every christian has some experience of these feelings. His reliance is on God, and prayer is his most interesting employment, especially when he can come with freedom to the mercy-seat, and plead with God as a man would plead with his friend. When christians thus come before God, they have a cause to plead; and God graciously allows them the use of many arguments. These two thoughts may usefully be followed out.

1. Christians engaging in prayer have a cause to plead before God. Although the christian hopes he has been the subject of a renewing change, and has truly passed from death unto life, and although he hopes for final salvation through a Redeemer, yet many circumstances conspire to make him tremble for himself. He finds within him an evil heart of unbelief prompting him to depart from the living God; he finds an unsubdued nature, and affections unsanctified, and constantly inclined to rest on sinful objects; he finds the world is casting its flattering lures in his path, and striving to draw him aside; and added to all the rest, that the adversary of souls is making some of his sharpest attacks on those over whom he is apprehensive of losing his power. These circumstances often distress a child of God, and lead him to fear lest he has been deceived in his hope, or lest he should make shipwreck of the faith, and become a castaway. Hence his own personal case is one cause that he has to plead when he appears at the mercy-seat.

Again, the spiritual welfare of others lies near the heart of a christian, and will also furnish a subject, on account of which he will earnestly plead with God. The christian has

been taught the worth of his own soul. Well does he remember the "wormwood and the gall," as he reflects on the time when convictions first seized his mind, and when he viewed his own precious soul exposed to destruction. Well does he recollect how anxiously he then sought the Lord, and with what vehemence he desired to obtain evidence that he had passed from death unto life, while his deliberate judgment now teaches him that he would not be profited if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul. With these views of the importance of salvation, taught him both by experience and observation, the christian feels sensibly for those around him. Perhaps, like Paul at Athens, his lot has fallen in some place where he is surrounded by men who are seeking the world, to the neglect of their souls. Perhaps his own near friends are unconverted. He may be the christian parent of ungodly children, or a pious child in some worldly and wicked family, or his brethren and sisters are living impenitent, and without God in the world. Every such case will distress the christian, and he will feel that he has a cause to argue before God; and often under its pressure, he will cry out with the prophet, "Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a

fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night, for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Jer. ix. 1. Nor is this all, for again, the cause of Christ on earth is another subject which engrosses the feelings of God's people, and furnishes a fruitful theme for pleading with God. The christian feels a unity of interest with this cause, and says of it, as the captive Jews in Babylon said of their holy city, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." Psalm cxxxvii. 5, 6. Pleading thus at the throne of grace for themselves, for those around them, and for the cause of religion on earth, God allows his people in the use of many arguments, which, in great mercy, he has made prevalent with himself; and we will now consider a few of the arguments which may with propriety be used in prayer, when we are pleading with God. God has so constructed the plan of his grace as to bestow on his people a spirit of prayer for those blessings which he designs to grant, and hence puts into their mouths and into their hearts, such arguments as he intends shall be prevalent with himself. When, there-

fore, christians approach the mercy-seat, hoping to prevail with the great Hearer of prayer, they should "order their cause" by using such arguments as he has sanctioned in his word. As,

1. The several perfections of God may be referred to in prayer, and used as arguments successfully before the Lord. Jehovah has been pleased to reveal in his word, many bright perfections belonging to himself. Truth, righteousness, justice, mercy, goodness, power, might, and dominion, and many other virtues and qualities, both natural and moral, are in various parts of the Bible ascribed to Jehovah. For the honour of these perfections he is exceedingly jealous, and everything that affects them he regards with lively interest. Hence it is that christians may plead with God successfully in prayer by adverting to his perfections, and showing how they would be exhibited clearly, or obscured, as the nature of the subject in question might demand. This was often done by the saints of old. The prayers of Abraham and Moses, to which we have already alluded as examples of the power of prayer, were constructed in this way; but other striking examples may be given. The memorable prayer of Solomon at the dedica-

tion of the temple, was marked in this way. Let us hear him: "And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven: and he said, Lord God of Israel, there is no god like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart; who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him: thou spakest also with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day." 1 Kings viii. 22–24. Here we perceive that Solomon addressed himself to God as a covenant-keeping God, as a God of truth, whose promise might be relied on, and on that he founds his argument. And through the whole of that long prayer reference is constantly made to the perfections of God as displayed in his long suffering, his truth in keeping covenant, and his mercy to men. Thus did Solomon plead with Jehovah. The prayer of king Jehoshaphat presents us with another example of the same kind. He was in trouble because a multitude of enemies were coming against him, and he knew that if they prevailed, God would be dishonoured; and he therefore based his requests on that fact:

"And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah, in the house of the Lord, and said, Art thou not God in heaven, and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thy hand is there not power and might? And now behold the children of Ammon, and Moab, and Mount Seir, whom thou wouldest not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt, behold, I say, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of thy possession, which thou has given us to inherit. O our God, wilt thou not judge them?" 2 Chron. xx. 5–12. In this prayer the pious king appeals to the power and dominion of God, as ruling over the heathen; to his faithfulness also, and to the encouragement he had given his people to trust in him. It was a prevalent plea, and God hearkened and heard.

The prayers of the pious Levites in the days of Nehemiah furnish other examples of pleading in prayer with arguments taken from the perfections of God as displayed in the providential care of his people. These pious men stood up and prayed thus unto the Lord: "Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham: and foundest his heart faithful before

thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, &c." Neh. ix. 7, 8. And so they go on through a long chapter recounting the wonders of God's providence to the people he had chosen, making that the ground of their argument. In like manner the psalmist argued with God in a time of distress: "Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? I will remember the works of the Lord: surely I will remember thy wonders of old. I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings." Psalm lxxvii. 9–12. Thus calling to mind God's former mercies, we may appeal to his faithfulness, and making that the ground of our argument we may offer acceptable prayer, and may prevail. In this way the several perfections of God may be used in prayer, and become prevalent arguments with him.

2. The glory of the Redeemer may be made a powerful argument in prayer. God, the Father, has resolved to glorify his Son, and to effect this all the plan of grace is constructed. To advance the glory of the Redeemer, God pours out his Spirit, whereby souls are converted; Christ sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied, and great glory redounds to

his name. Hence when christians pray, the glory of the Redeemer is a powerful argument to use with God. This argument was used very successfully by the apostles in the early ages of the church. The book of Acts records several examples where the disciples spread out an argument founded on the glory of Christ. The chief Priests and the Jews generally opposed them, because they believed on Christ, and glorified him, and confessed him before men. His glory was truly their chief aim, and when they used this as their main argument in prayer it prevailed with God. The place was shaken where they were assembled together, their prayers were heard and answered, they were filled with the Holy Ghost, they spake the word with boldness, they gave witness with power to the resurrection of Jesus, and "great grace was upon them all."

3. The glory of the Holy Spirit is another argument which may be used successfully by the saints in prayer, especially his glory in the work of conversion. Says the psalmist, "When the Lord shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory." Psalm cii. 16. The glory of the Holy Spirit is especially displayed in the work of conversion, and hence when

christians pray for a revival of religion, or for enlightening and divine teaching in their own souls, they may with much propriety use as an argument the glory of the Holy Spirit, which will thereby be advanced. They may describe the enlightening of the mind through the operations of the Spirit, the discoveries their own hearts thus obtained, the new discoveries of Christ, and the instructions gained from the holy scriptures. The great change in the mind of a convert will thus be ascribed to the operations of the Holy Spirit, as his work will be distinctly seen in it, and this being spread forth forms a powerful argument before the throne of eternal grace.

4. The particular promises of God's word may in prayer be turned into very prevalent arguments before his throne. He is a God of truth, and every thing that he has promised will in due time be fulfilled; and hence his promises connected with his faithfulness in performance, form one of the strongest arguments in prayer. "Hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" Numbers xxiii. 19. It is a plea almost irresistible. Daniel the prophet understood this argument, and used it with great effect. He and his people were in cap-

tivity in Babylon, and every thing around them looked exceedingly dark. But Daniel was familiar with the scriptures, and in the prophecies of Jeremiah he had discovered that God had limited the captivity of Judah to seventy years, and could readily see by calculation that the time of deliverance was at hand. Dan. ix. 1—3. Jer. xxv. 9—12, and Jer. xxix. 10. The faith of Daniel was greatly strengthened as he considered these promises, and when he spread them out in prayer before God, the Lord hearkened, and heard, and sent his angel with an answer of peace. Dan. ix. 20—23.

The apostles of our Lord understood this way of pleading in prayer. As their Lord had ascended to heaven, he had given them a promise of miraculous gifts: "Ye shall receive power," said he, "after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you;" and "ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." Acts i. 5, 8. As soon as he was taken up from them, instead of sitting idly down or spending their time in fruitless complaints, they continued in prayer day after day, pleading no doubt these very promises, until the day of Pentecost came, and thousands fell before the irresistible influences of the Holy Ghost.

5. Passages of scripture which at any time have been peculiarly opened to our own mind, and applied to our own case, may be successfully used as arguments in prayer. David appears to have had this in view when he says, "Remember the word unto thy servant upon which thou hast caused me to hope." Psalm cxix. 49. The word of God is made the great instrument of awakening the soul in the first place, and then exciting hope in the breast of the penitent. But it is not always the same word, and perhaps it may not be usual for two persons to be comforted in the same way or by the same word. One passage reaches the heart of one person, and another passage that of a second; and not unfrequently a text is opened and applied to one person in the most comforting manner, insomuch that the person is ready to say of such passages, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and they were the joy and rejoicing of my heart," Jer. xv. 16, while this same word is dark and comfortless to all around. Thus in the most sovereign manner God arms his word with power, sometimes for one heart, and sometimes for another; and hence some parts of the scripture will be more sweet to some individuals than other parts, and a text that

has been the means of awakening or comforting any person will always be heard by that person with a thrill of delight, and such passages may be used by them and plead, to far more effect than they could use other texts; concerning such passages the mind is enlightened, they touch the heart, and become powerful arguments with God.

Such is pleading in prayer, and such are some of the arguments which christians may use successfully with their heavenly Father, and when they plead his perfections, the glory of the Redeemer, the glory of the Holy Spirit, and the promises of his word, they may hope he will hear and answer their requests.

CHAPTER X.

IMPORTUNITY IN PRAYER.

It is wonderful condescension in God to hearken at all to the cries of fallen sinners, and he would be fully justified should he cover himself with a cloud, so that our prayers should not pass through. But how merciful he is! how condescending! how kind! He encourages his people to pour out the desires of their hearts before him, to make known their wants in the most familiar manner, to urge their suit by persuasion and argument, and becoming importunate to resolve on taking no denial. To this course men are exhorted by the prophet: "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." Isaiah lxii. 6, 7. Such is importunate prayer, and to the exercise of this duty, the Lord gives us gracious encouragement.

We have already cited the example of Jacob as he wrestled with the angel, as a proof

of the power of prayer; but it was no less striking as an example of importunity. Several things in the account may be noted as showing this. It was single combat between the patriarch and his heavenly assailant, a battle hand to hand, for neither party had a second to take up the contest. Jacob was filled with anxiety respecting the result of his expected interview with Esau on the coming day, and God was his only hope. When Jehovah met him in the person of the great Angel of the covenant, he appeared for the moment more like an enemy than a friend, as though he would dispute the passage with him. This rendered the patriarch more importunate, and by his prayers and tears, by his ardent cries, and strong actings of faith, he kept his hold of the divine Being whose personal presence was granted him. Here was a shining example for us to follow of importunate and agonizing prayer in any time of trial. God could easily have crushed this creature of his power, but instead of that he was delighted with his importunity, strengthened him for the conflict, and gave him the victory.

Such a victory is of immense consequence to every praying soul. It was a good remark of one, that "the tree of life is far better than

the tree of knowledge," and if by importunate prayer we can obtain a blessing from God, it is much more to be prized than all knowledge if the blessing fails.

Our Lord's parable of the unjust judge furnishes another strong argument for the exercise of importunate prayer. It was to urge the duty that our Lord spake it. "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: and there was a widow in that city, and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of my adversary. And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily." Luke xviii. 1–8. This case, not a real one but one supposed, our Lord used for the encouragement of his praying people, assuring them in this way that faith, and fervency, and perseverance would not fail of suc-

cess. The judge supposed in the parable, did for a long while frown upon the widow, taking no notice of her cause, and conniving at all the wrongs she suffered, and finally did her justice merely to be rid of her importunity. Now, said our Lord, Hear what the unjust judge saith; and shall not a God of mercy do better for his renewed people than this wicked man would have done? The parable furnishes much encouragement for importunity in prayer. Let us analyze the encouragement here presented. We are taught,

1. That God has a people in the world whom he acknowledges as his own. He calls them his elect, yea, "his own elect," and surely we need not hesitate to call them so. They are a chosen people, a peculiar people, a praying people, and God's purposes are made with an eye to his own glory in the salvation of that people. They are precious to him, as the apple of his eye, dear as the lot of his inheritance.

2. We see in this parable what God requires of his people in order to his granting their requests. They must be importunate at his throne; they must cry unto him day and night. Not that he needs their remonstrances, or can be moved by their pleadings; but he

has made this their duty, and to the exercise of this duty he promises mercy. Thus those who would succeed must become importunate; they must cry with earnestness, and wrestle with God as Jacob did with the Angel of the covenant, holding him fast that he should not go without bestowing a blessing.

3. No discouragements that may appear for the moment should be allowed to turn us aside from following after God, and calling on his name. He may delay to answer our requests for a long season, until he has brought into exercise all our stock of patience. But he does this to try us, and to see if we will persevere in adhering to him. We have encouragement to do this; for,

4. We have assurance that mercy will come at last, "I tell you," said our Lord, "that he will avenge them speedily." The encouragements to importunate prayer may be strikingly illustrated by the case of the widow in the parable compared with God's people. The widow was a stranger, and in no ways related to the judge before whom she brought her cause; but God's praying people are his own elect—a people whom he knows, and whom he loves—a people whom he delights in, and who are to him a peculiar treasure. Again, the

widow was but one, a single individual, and a very obscure one too; but God's praying people are many, who come to him on the same errand, at the same time; and as the saints in glory unite their hearts and voices in praise around the throne above, so the saints on earth unite in besieging the throne of grace below. The widow also came to an unjust judge, to a most wicked man, who even proclaimed his sin as Sodom, and gloried in his wickedness, acknowledging that he neither feared God nor regarded man; but we come in prayer to a most righteous Lord and Governor, yea, to a most compassionate Father, who is able and ready to help us. And farther, the widow stood alone, and had no one so much as to speak for her; while we have a glorious Intercessor, an Advocate with the Father, even Jesus Christ. Nor was this all, for the widow had no promise of speeding, nor was the least encouragement held out that she should succeed, or that even her suit should be entertained; but God encourages his people to ask, with his promise to give, and even encourages them to ask great things, to ask much, to open their mouths wide, promising to fill them.

Probably, also, the judge was accessible

only at particular times, when it pleased him to hold court, and sit upon the judgment seat; but God's ear is always open, and by day or night we may call upon him, and he will hear our prayers. The importunity of the widow was provoking to the judge. She wearied him with her suit, and his spirit was chafed, for every time he opened his court, lo! that widow stood before him. He wished, no doubt, that he could drive her away, but she would come, and he had no peace until he took up her cause. But it is not so with God. The earnestness and importunity of his people is pleasing to him, and he greatly delights in those fervent prayers which his people pour into his ears.*

The subject of importunate prayer is before us. God will have men in earnest who profess to seek him, and to such efforts, and only such, he gives his promise. It is those who strive, or agonize to enter in at the strait gate who will succeed, and none will find God unto final salvation, except they seek him with all their heart and with all their soul.

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* See Henry on this parable.

CHAPTER XI.

CONTINUANCE IN PRAYER.

THERE is a strong tendency in human nature to decline from the right ways of the Lord, and having begun well, and run well for a time, to slide backward, and become cold and careless, to cast off fear, and restrain prayer before God. But Jehovah would not have his people do thus, but would have them not only pray with all manner of prayer, pleading their cause with God, and becoming importunate with him, but would have them continue in the duty with all perseverance. It is true that God does not see fit always to grant immediate answers to prayer, and sometimes his promise tarries for many years, and when this is so, mortal spirits will often tire and faint, and sometimes become so impatient as to fret against providence, and say in the language of an ancient complainer, "What, should I wait for the Lord any longer?" 2 Kings vi. 33. But true faith dictates a different course of conduct, and the

true christian will not retire from the mercy-seat, but when the blessing tarries he will wait for it, and continue in prayer. Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, were all praying men, as well as men of eminent faith, and yet their long lives were all passed, and they went down to the grave, before the blessings promised them were bestowed. Yet they continued in prayer, and although four hundred years were to pass before the promised seed were to take possession of Canaan, still they prayed on. Gen. xv. 13–16. Thus the blessings sought in prayer by these patriarchs were delayed in the wisdom of God's providence, but they did not fail, neither did the faith of the patriarchs fail, but they continued constant in prayer unto the day of their death.

But perhaps it is asked, Why is it that God thus tries the faith of his people, and even discourages them by sometimes delaying to grant their requests? Two reasons may be assigned.

1. Christians may not always know what is best for them, and to grant their requests just as they are offered may injure them most essentially. We are short sighted at the best, and cannot understand the position which things may assume hereafter, so that the object which it seems desirable to possess to-day,

may become very undesirable, and perhaps absolutely hurtful to-morrow. But God sees the end from the beginning, and therefore, in great mercy, when any object is sought by his people, the present possession of which he sees would be hurtful, he delays to grant it, looking rather to the permanent benefit of the soul, than to its present gratification.

2. God may purpose in this way to try the graces of his people, and show them up to themselves, that they may not be high-minded, but fear. They may lack patience, or they may fail in submission, or they may need more humility; and to strengthen and invigorate these graces, the answer to their prayers may be delayed, and for a long season they may walk in darkness. Still God may be near, and his love to the soul may be as fervent as ever, while he yet tries the faith of his saints by delays, and causes patience to have her perfect work. Yet for all this, the people of God should continue in prayer, and all who have true faith will not fail to keep their hearts at the mercy-seat. The example of Elijah is at once striking and edifying. An awful judgment was desolating the land, and the prophet prayed most earnestly for its removal, and not only prayed earnestly, but continued his sup-

plications, sending his servant time after time to look out upon the sea for the expected token of rain, which he fully believed God would send upon the earth. Very probably the servant supposed that to go once or twice was amply sufficient, and when he returned saying, "There is nothing," he no doubt supposed the prophet would cease praying, for a time, at least. But it was not so. "Go again," said his master; yea, "Go seven times." A definite number is here put for an indefinite one; meaning, probably, that he should continue to go until the sign appeared; and at the same time Elijah was lifting up his soul to God in prayer, and continuing his supplications before him. 1 Kings xviii. 42–45. Thus the man of true faith will always do. He may not always feel the flow of warm devotion thrilling in his heart, but may even feel dull and disconsolate; wicked thoughts may spring up within him, so that his thoughts may seem to him almost like sins, and his tears and confessions like the veriest hypocrisy. And yet if he has real faith, he will continue to pray, and no darkness nor discouragement can keep him from the mercy-seat. There is another important reason why we should continue in prayer; it is an evidence of the reality of our

religion. When Job was accused by his friends of hypocrisy, he defended himself on one occasion by an appeal to the fact of his continuing to pray. Alluding to the hypocrite, he asks with great emphasis, "Will he always call upon God?" Job xxvii. 10, implying that herein the renewed and unrenewed spirit was manifest. And such is the fact. There are many whose minds become excited on the subject of religion, and who thereupon begin to pray, and to seek after God. Presently they begin to hope that they have found God, or rather are found of him, and for a time they follow the ways of religion, continue to call on God, frequent the company of the godly, appear very much like christians, and entertain a hope that they are such. But after awhile it is discovered that they do not pray. Perhaps everything else is fair about them, but alas! they do not pray. Are they christians? Ah! we fear not. They do not pray. Had they continued to call on God, we might hope for them, however dull and spiritless they might seem; and we might even overlook some inconsistencies. But ah! they do not pray. Will they be reclaimed, and saved? We cannot tell.

The praying people of God will increase in

strength. As they continue to pray, God continues to afford the light of his countenance, and to answer their prayers. He did so when the prophet lifted up his cries on Mount Carmel. He will ever do thus. He has never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye my face, in vain; and though he may delay, and for wise purposes try the faith and patience of his people, yet at the last their prayers, fervent and persevering, will be graciously regarded, and the blessings sought will be bestowed. Many things may look discouraging, and we may at times be strongly tempted to relax in prayer. Nothing may seem to move around us, the spiritual heavens over us may seem as brass, and the ground under us as iron, and when we cry and shout God may seem to shut out our prayer. But true faith will hold on, and prayer will still ascend; and though we are constrained often to say as did Elijah's servant when he returned from looking toward the sea, "There is nothing," yet the christian will continue to pray, and the language of his conduct is, Hold on, hold on, continue calling; persevere, pray without ceasing. Go again: go again: go seven times, and never give over while life lasts. Such will be the conduct of true faith. Is such our conduct? Such is our duty, and God will be honoured by our prompt obedience.

CHAPTER XII.

IMMEDIATE PRAYER.

It was stated by a prophet that a time would come when the inhabitants of one city would go to another, saying, "Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of Hosts," Zech. viii. 21; showing that those who are sensible of their need of divine mercy will stir up themselves and others to hasten to the mercy-seat without delay. This is also our duty and our privilege. Delays are always dangerous, and immediate prayer hence becomes our duty. This duty may be urged from several important considerations.

1. There is now great encouragement to pray, as an ample atonement for sin has been made. It is by no means necessary for us to stop here to inquire whether the atonement covers a great number or a small number, or whether it is definite or indefinite. These questions may be important in their place, but we have no occasion to settle them here. It will suffice

for our present purpose to say that the atonement is most ample. It is a great feast, a wide fountain, a river deep and broad, where there are waters to swim in, a river which cannot be passed over. Through this atonement a door of mercy is set open for Adam's ruined race, and a way into the holiest of all is made manifest. Christ is upon a mercy-seat, and penitent sinners are invited and encouraged to come freely before him. Men being entirely sinful cannot naturally do anything pleasing in God's sight. Should they offer the cattle upon a thousand hills, or pay down the riches of the whole world, they could not purchase exemption from the penalty affixed by Jehovah to the transgression of his law; and without a satisfaction to the law of God, prayer is vain. Should we attempt to pray without reference to an atonement, we might expect to be indignantly spurned away; and God might demand of us, as he did of Joshua when he was praying before him because Israel was smitten before their enemies, "Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them;" Joshua vii. 10, 11; teaching him farther that he must not expect to prosper or to be ac-

cepted in his religious services until an atonement was made. Young Elihu, speaking on the part of God, declared to Job the same great truth, that prayers are acceptable only through an atonement: "If there be a messenger with him," says he, "an interpreter, one among a thousand, to show unto man his uprightness; then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. Then shall he pray unto God, and he will be favourable unto him." Job xxxiii. 23–26. We have this special encouragement for immediate prayer, a ransom is provided; an atonement is made; Christ has come, the great Mediator between God and man, the "Daysman," as the scripture terms him, who can lay his hand on both parties, and so make peace.

2. We are encouraged to immediate prayer in view of the great variety of means provided by which the knowledge of salvation is conveyed to us. The written word of God is published to the world, and in the good providence of God is put into our hands. In this we receive abundant instruction concerning God, and our duty to him; concerning ourselves, our original state, our present fallen condition, and our future prospects; concern-

ing also the way of salvation by Jesus Christ, and how men may expect to be saved. The revelation which God has thus given furnishes a firm ground for prayer; for, as we read in the scriptures that God in Christ has laid a foundation for the redemption of man, we have an encouragement to pray that we could not possess without it; but then with confidence we may approach the eternal throne. So, too, as we are instructed by the word respecting our fallen state as viewed by Jehovah, we are moved to humble ourselves before him in prayer, with a full understanding of our need of his grace. The institution of the christian Sabbath, and the public preaching of the gospel are other means furnished by Jehovah, giving encouragement for men to pray to him. The constant return of the holy day of God, with all its sacred associations, cannot fail to encourage to prayer. The doors of the sanctuary are then thrown open, and the mercy-seat is thus displayed, and the influence of this naturally leads men to the footstool of mercy, there to seek the favour of God. Seeing this, we can hardly fail of calling to our fellows, and saying in the language of the psalmist, "O come, let us worship, and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our

Maker!" Psalm xcv. 6. Nearly the same remarks will apply to the sacraments of the New Testament. The institution of them as symbols of divine things serves greatly to encourage the worship of men, as thereby we have a medium of communication with heaven, and our faith is strengthened through the medium of the senses. Thus do the various means of grace encourage to prayer, and when rightly viewed serve to lead the soul to bow at the throne of eternal mercy.

3. We should engage in the duty of immediate prayer from the consideration that now is a day of grace. The precept of God by his prophet, "Seek ye the Lord, while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near," Isaiah lv. 6, clearly intimates that there is a time when the Lord may be found, and when men may call upon him with the encouragement of being heard. Such is a day of grace. Then the door is open, and mercy is calling to the sinner to turn and live. It was such a time in the old world, "when once the long suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing," 1 Pet. iii. 20. It was such a time to Nineveh when Jonah proclaimed in the name of the Lord, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be over-

thrown." Jonah iii. 4. It was such a day to ancient Israel when God sent to them his prophets, rising early and sending them, and exhorting them, saying, "Oh! do not this abominable thing that I hate." Jer. xliv. 4. It was such a day also to the Jews when the Saviour came among them, and in the most winning accents called after them to follow him; and it is such a day to us when the gospel sounds in our ears. Then is a day of grace—then is a time of mercy—then the Saviour is calling, and that is a time when men have encouragement to make immediate prayer unto the God of their life.

4. Another reason why we should immediately engage in prayer to God, is that we have long neglected this important duty. What prayerless lives we have led! Our childhood and youth were thoughtlessness and vanity, and our more mature years have been strongly marked by worldliness and sin, while we have said in our hearts, if not with our lips, "What is the Almighty, that we should serve him, and what profit should we have if we pray to him?" Job xxi. 15. Such, to a considerable extent, has been the course of our lives. And even when we have professed to know God experimentally, how little time we have

spent in our closets, or in our families, or in the social meeting, seeking mercies of the God of heaven! When we thus reflect on our neglect of the important duty of prayer, it truly becomes us to repair to the mercy-seat without delay, and lose no further time in humbling our souls before God.

5. There is an appointed time for man's probation, which is another reason why we should immediately betake ourselves to prayer. There is not a moment to be lost. The last hour of probation is hastening on, and the opportunity of securing eternal life will soon pass away. "There is a sin unto death." 1 John v. 16. There is a point in sin beyond which there is no forgiveness, "neither in this world, neither in the world to come." Matt. xii. 32. The closing of probation ushers in that dreadful hour. As then the close of our probationary term approaches, how anxious we should be to be reconciled to our final Judge; and with what earnestness we should pray for grace that we may be prepared to meet God in peace! Did we but realize the shortness of time, we should not lose a moment, but should fly to the mercy-seat without delay, lest in an unlooked for moment the last sand in our glass should fall, the door of mercy close, and our souls perish.

Such are some of the reasons for immediate prayer—reasons why without any delay we should seek after God, and spread out our desires before him. There is an atonement made for men; there is a variety of rich means provided; it is a day of grace; the work has been long neglected; and the extreme point of probation may very soon be reached. With these considerations all pressing upon us, shall we not go speedily and pray before the Lord?

CHAPTER XIII.

PRAYER FOR COMMON THINGS.

THE question often arises in the minds of conscientious men, how far it is proper to make temporal matters the subject of prayer. The duty of praying for spiritual things no one doubts; but to seek the blessing of God on our daily employments is sometimes thought a species of profanation, and the man who would pray most earnestly for an increase of grace, or to be humbled for sin, or to be purified from defilement, would rarely, if ever, ask God's blessing on his occupation or trade, or seek the assistance of his grace in the ordinary labours of his hands. But if we look into this matter carefully, we shall find that it is both lawful and proper, as well as highly advantageous to address God in prayer for every needed good, temporal as well as spiritual. Some reasons for this may be assigned.

1. It is so, because God is the author of all our blessings. Nothing is more certain than

the declaration of an apostle, that "every good gift, and every perfect gift, is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." James i. 17. There is no blessing that we enjoy, either in mind, body, or estate; there is nothing relating to our mortal existence, or to our eternal destiny; there is nothing that concerns this world, or the world to come, but which comes from the good hand of the Lord. It is his Spirit which enlightens and renews the soul, and forms it for glory; and it is equally owing to his power that the labours of our hands are prospered, or our daily bread afforded. God is therefore to be acknowledged as truly in one case as in the other; and while we are thankful for quickening grace, and pray to God for its increase, we should be thankful to him also for the blessings and comforts of this life, and should make our prayer before him for the success of every lawful undertaking.

2. The providence of God extends to every event, small as well as great, events relating to the body equally as to the soul. There is nothing on which we may place our hand, but we must in truth say, God did it. He works by instruments, he arranges and moves second causes, but he is the great first cause, and the

sovereign disposer of all things; so that his declaration by the mouth of his prophet is strictly true, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." Isaiah xlv. 7. Here we have the word of Jehovah himself that there is no being or instrument in the world independent of him, and that all creatures and causes act by his command, or through his permission. The influence, and the mode of operation may differ, but the power is one, and the providence is universal. This fact furnishes a reason, and a strong one, why we should rely on God for temporal things, and pray to him for his blessing on every work of our hands. If he does not despise the cry of the young ravens, neither will he refuse to listen when we commit to him our temporal concerns, and ask his blessing on them.

3. Another reason why we should address God in prayer for his blessing on our temporal concerns, is that without the blessing of God nothing can prosper, but with it the weakest things will be made effectual. We are all fully confident that we have no power to renew our own hearts, that we cannot justify ourselves in the sight of God, that we cannot adopt ourselves into his family, nor can we

sanctify our souls, and make them holy; and hence we pray for these things, referring them all to the power and grace of God. And can we gain common things without God's blessing? No more than we can renew our hearts; and we might just as soon think of purging our souls from sin by our own efforts, as to succeed in any worldly occupation without the divine guidance. Hence the importance of praying to God for all temporal things.

4. The word of God encourages us to spread out before him all our wants. The representations of Jehovah in the scriptures are those of great tenderness and condescension. He is spoken of as hearkening to the groaning of the prisoner, as opening his ears at the cry of the needy, and hearing the weakest and feeblest of the creatures he has made. His language is most encouraging: "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." Psalm lxxxi. 10. "Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and ye shall find: knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Luke xi. 9. "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." Psalm xxxiv. 6. So encouraging is the language of the Bible, inviting us to bring every want, and lay it down in the light of God's countenance.

5. We are encouraged to this course by the example of holy men of old. The example of Nehemiah is in point, for he prayed to God for a blessing upon whatever business he had in hand. It is true he humbled his soul before God for the wickedness of his heart, and sought of God spiritual mercies, but this did not prevent him from asking temporal blessings also: "Grant me mercy," said he, "in the sight of this man." Neh. i. 11. He was about to seek aid of the king to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. It was a temporal matter, and yet he carried it to the throne of grace; and when the king demanded of him to state his request, he again spread it out before God: "So I prayed," said he, "to the God of heaven." And throughout the book wherein he gives in detail a record of his labours, we have repeated examples of his pious ejaculations for the blessing of God upon his labours. The prayers of Hezekiah, and of Isaiah the prophet, when Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, came against Judah, were of the same kind. The matter was a temporal one altogether, and yet the pious king and the prophet made special prayer on account of it, spreading out before the Lord the threatening letter of Sennacherib, and naming distinctly

the things that they feared. 2 Kings xix. 1—19, and 2 Chron. xxxii. 16—20, and Isa. xxxvii. 14—20. The examples of Abraham, and Moses, and David, and Solomon, and Jehoshaphat, and others, all praying men, will illustrate this point, and show that when temporal blessings were needed, they as readily spread out that case before God, as they did when they felt their need of his grace, and besought him for spiritual mercies alone.

From all these considerations we may feel instructed in regard to our duty. We all have engagements of a temporal kind, and to some extent are engaged in affairs which demand attention, and the apostolic precept is binding on all men, "Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord." Rom. xii. 11. We may freely pray to God for his blessing on every lawful occupation and employment; and if there is any thing that we pursue on which we cannot consistently and conscientiously ask God's blessing, we may rely upon it, that thing is wrong, and if pursued will be a greater sin.

CHAPTER XIV.

PRAYING IN THE NAME OF CHRIST.

When our Lord was about to ascend to heaven, where he was before, he engaged to send the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, down to abide with his people unto the end of the world. Referring to this time, he said to his disciples, "In that day ye shall ask me nothing: verily, verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you." John xvi. 23. We cannot suppose that our Lord intended to say here that his people were never to pray to him after his ascension, but more probably his meaning was that after the enlightening of their minds by the promised descent of the Comforter, or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they would immediately improve their interest at the throne of grace, and supplicate the Father through his name. Prayer in the name of Christ is thus taught, and we shall find it useful to consider it as a distinct topic.

Praying in the name of Christ clearly implies that we have some correct understanding of the various offices which he sustains in effecting the great work of man's redemption. In the scheme of divine grace, when he was "bringing many sons unto glory," Heb. ii. 10, the Saviour appeared for them in some very interesting and important characters. He is a Prophet, and in this character he enlightens a dark world, and especially the darkened minds of men. He is a Priest, and in this character was made a sacrifice for sin, and then pleads the merit of his death before the throne. He is a King, and as such he subdues his people to himself, overcoming their stubbornness, and sweetly inclining their wills to choose him as their Saviour and Redeemer. He is a Surety, and as such occupies the place his people should have occupied before the bar of eternal justice. He is also a Mediator, the only Mediator between God and man, who stands between the parties as God and man himself, so making peace. Praying in Christ's name very naturally implies a knowledge of these offices, as well as a true belief in them. Believing thus of the Saviour, it is both our duty and our highest interest to come to the throne of divine grace in his name.

1. It is a duty that we owe to the majesty of God. It would be considered the height of presumption for any private subject to approach his earthly sovereign without an attendant, some minister of state, to introduce him and offer his petition; much more then is it a duty for us to approach the majesty of heaven not alone, and not in our own names, but leaning on Christ, and in the prevailing name of this Advocate before the throne.

2. It is a duty that we owe to the holiness of God that we should approach the mercy-seat in the name of Christ, for as Jehovah is holy and pure, it certainly is most important for our success that we come before him in the name of one who is pure and spotless also. Heb. vii. 26.

3. It is due to the justice of God that we should approach him in the name of Christ, for we have broken his law, and have no safe way of approach to him but through the merits of one who has fulfilled the law, and become the end of it for righteousness to every one who believeth. Romans x. 4.

4. To pray in the name of Christ is a duty that we owe to the Saviour himself, for being every way suitable to act as a Mediator, and being prevalent in intercession before the

throne, it is most ungrateful in us to refuse his proffered aid.

5. It is a duty we owe ourselves to offer our prayers in the name of Christ. "There is salvation in none other," Acts iv. 12, and if we reject the Saviour's intercession we shall perish.

These few considerations exhibit the duty of offering our prayers in Christ's name. But this is not all, for it is a privilege thus to do, and a manifest advantage accrues to the soul thus to present our petitions before God. For,

1. Thereby we have communion with Christ. When with humble reliance on the Saviour's merits we approach the throne of divine grace, and in his name present our requests, we do in effect make a common cause with him, and may adopt the language of an apostle, "And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ." 1 John i. 3.

2. If we approach the mercy-seat in Christ's name, we may make known to him, as to a compassionate Saviour, all our wants, difficulties, and perplexities. Not unfrequently the christian has trials that he cannot reveal to his nearest friend. He may have secret temptations and sins that he cannot disclose to any one; but when he comes to the mercy-seat in the Saviour's name, he will feel a nearness to

him which will encourage him to make full disclosures to him, and to pour all his sorrows into his bosom.

3. Another great advantage of praying in the name of Christ, is, that we may be assured he will present to the Father only such petitions as are proper and suitable. We are short-sighted, and know but in part, and our ignorance is such that we are liable to desire many things which, in the end, would prove hurtful, and to make requests which, if granted, would ruin us. But Christ is perfect in wisdom, and when we present our prayers through him, he, so to speak, will sift the petitions, offering to the Father only such as are proper, perfuming them with his own intercessions before the throne.

4. When we truly pray in the name of Christ, we have an assurance of being heard. So our Lord promised his people, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." John xvi. 23, 24.

Such is praying in the name of Christ, such is its duty, and such its advantages. As we consider these advantages, we cannot but

see how the absence of Christ's bodily presence is turned into a great mercy to his people. We sometimes imagine that those were greatly favoured who saw the Saviour in the flesh, and heard the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. In some respects it was so, but the advantages of his intercession at the throne of eternal mercy are far greater. Before that throne he ever liveth to make intercession; there he pleads the cause of his people, and through his prevalent intercession, they are set free.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ASSISTANCE OF THE SPIRIT IN PRAYER.

We have been contemplating the important duty of prayer, earnest, agonizing, fervent, wrestling prayer, in secret, in the family, in the social circle, and in the sanctuary; we have spoken of it as an immediate duty, that without any delay we should repair to the mercy-seat, and there order our cause before God, and fill our mouths with arguments. And knowing our frail, feeble, dependent state, we have considered the duty and the privilege of praying in the name of Christ, and offering all our petitions with humble, yet heartfelt, reliance on his prevalent intercession before the throne. Still a difficulty may lie in our way. We may feel depressed. We may feel unworthy so much as to lift up our eyes to heaven, and may fear that all our prayers, and cries, and tears, are mere howlings, and can avail nothing before God. But notwithstanding all this, God has given encouragement

to the doubting christian, by setting before him the promised assistance of the Holy Spirit in prayer. The holy apostle records this promise: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings, which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints, according to the will of God." Rom. viii. 26, 27. Here we are instructed to believe that it is the peculiar office work of the Spirit to assist the saints in prayer. Let us consider it. It is declared, in the text just recited, that the Spirit helps the people of God when they pray. Of the fact, then, we are not to doubt. While we are in this world, if we are truly hoping and waiting for that which as yet we see not, then we shall be praying for it. "Hope supposes desire, and that desire offered to God is prayer." In the declaration quoted from Paul, the first thought presented is the weakness of the praying soul, "We know not what we should pray for as we ought." As to the matter of our requests, we know not what we should ask of God, for we are not competent judges of our own

condition. Solomon, who well understood this deficiency in human nature, asks, "Who knoweth what is good for a man in this life?" Eccl. vi. 12. We are short-sighted, altogether prejudiced in favour of the flesh, and are prone to separate the end from the means of its attainment. Our Lord may often say to us, as he did to the sons of Zebedee, "Ye know not what ye ask." Matt. xx. 22. We are very much like foolish children, who often desire things which would hurt them, or things absolutely improper for them, as James and John once desired their Lord to send fire from heaven to consume his enemies. Luke ix. 54. Thus in many things we ask ignorantly, knowing not what we should pray for as we ought.

In the *manner* of our prayers we are also deficient. It is not enough that we do that which is proper, but we should do it in a proper manner. It is not enough that we seek God, but we must seek him "after the due order." 1 Chron. xv. 13. In this we are often at a loss. Our graces are weak, our affections are cold, and our thoughts wandering. Nevertheless, the Spirit does assist the saints in prayer, and to this the apostle undoubtedly refers, when he says, "And because ye are sons, God

hath sent forth the spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father." Gal. iv. 6. We have the same thing promised by Jehovah to his ancient people: "And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications." Zech. xii. 10. Here is a promise of great blessings. The Spirit is promised to be poured out upon the soul, specially as a spirit of supplication, assisting the soul in prayer. But how does the Spirit assist the saints in prayer? It is not by making any new revelation: this we are not now to expect. "Vision and prophecy" are now "sealed up," Dan. ix. 24, and "God, who at sundry times, and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." Heb. i. 1.

We are no longer, therefore, to look for revelations, dreams, voices, and communications of this sort, and they who do so, as some do at the present day, are preparing themselves for a grievous disappointment. But how, then, we ask again, is it done? We answer in the words of Paul, "The Spirit helpeth our infirmities." The Spirit does not pray for us, thus doing our work, and relieving us from

the duty, but he dwells in the hearts of his people as a spirit of supplication, aiding them, or, as the original word for *helpeth* very strikingly intimates, lifting with them, as one would help his neighbour raise up some heavy burden.* Thus he who prays receives help from the Spirit of God. Whatever our strength may be, whether small or great, we must put it forth, and then depend for success upon the strength of the Lord.

There are several ways in which the Spirit, dwelling in the heart, assists the true people of God in prayer.

1. He does thus by suggesting to their minds such portions of the scriptures as are applicable to their case. Often when the christian first engages in prayer, his mind will be dull, stupid, and dark, and his prayers will seem to himself most tasteless, and spiritless; but as he proceeds, his affections will enkindle, his mind will become enlightened, passages of scripture suitable to his case, or to the subject for which he is praying, will crowd into his mind, and he will come with confidence to the mercy-seat, ordering his cause before God, and filling his mouth with arguments. Thus "the Spirit maketh intercession for the saints, according

* See Henry, and Clarke on Rom. viii. 26.

to the will of God," according to his revealed will, the scriptures. Through this medium he dictates our requests, indites our petitions, and, so to speak, draws up our plea for us. Thus the Spirit, as an enlightening Spirit, teaches the christian what to pray for; as a sanctifying Spirit, he forms holy graces within, and as a comforting Spirit, banishes all discouragement.

2. The Spirit assists the people of God in prayer, by filling their minds with deep and unutterable longings after holiness of heart and life, as well as after communion with God. This probably is what Paul meant when he spoke of the Spirit interceding for, or in, the saints "with groanings which cannot be uttered." Sometimes the mind of the christian, as he attempts to pray, will be filled with thoughts and desires too mighty to be expressed, and when no language can declare fully the emotions of the mind. Fluency in prayer is by no means essential to its gift or reality, and there may be much praying in the Spirit when not a word is spoken; but the unutterable groan is full of meaning, and God understands it, because it is the language of his own Spirit. These feelings, and this deep swelling and groaning within, are peculiar to the secret retirement of the christian, and

seldom, if ever, appear in public, and should be carefully distinguished from an assumed groaning sometimes put on *in public*, attracting notice, without conveying any devotional feelings. The prayers of Moses, as the people of Israel stood by the Red Sea, were of this heart-affecting kind, and so fervent and agonizing were his prayers, that the Lord demanded "Wherefore criest thou unto me?" Exodus xiv. 15. And yet, when we examine the place, we cannot find that Moses uttered a word. It is probable that his soul was too full for utterance. Such, too, was the prayer of Hannah, when she stood in the Tabernacle before Eli, the High Priest; moving her lips only, while no sound was uttered to express the sorrowful emotions of her heart. 1 Sam. i. 10. Such, too, were the prayers of Elijah, when on the top of Carmel he besought the mercy of God for the land. We hear nothing of his words, but in an agony of soul, with a heart too full to speak, he cast himself on the ground before God, and put his face between his knees. 1 Kings xviii. 42. Thus does the Spirit intercede for the saints with groanings which cannot be uttered.

3. The Spirit assists the saints in prayer by leading the soul to Christ. The soul, dark and

ignorant, needs teaching, and the Spirit takes of the things of Christ, and shows them to him. He is trembling before the tribunal of eternal justice, and the Spirit guides him to the righteousness of Christ, on which he may safely trust. Is he hungry? Christ is presented as the bread of life. Is he thirsty? Christ is the water of salvation. Is he in difficulty and doubt, or groaning under a load of pollution and sin? Christ, through the Spirit, becomes to him wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Thus does the Spirit assist the people of God in ordering their cause at his mercy-seat, and God, whose is the Spirit, and who knows the mind of the Spirit, prepares an answer of peace according to the request.

A consideration of this subject may well encourage the praying people of God in presenting their requests at his throne. Such is the stupefying nature of sin that christians are prone to become remiss in the most sacred duties, to cast off fear, and restrain prayer before God. But when we consider Christ as on a mercy-seat, and the Holy Spirit ready to help our infirmities, and make intercession for us according to the will of God, surely we may take encouragement, and come with great

confidence before the mercy-seat. And though we may be cast down and overwhelmed with a sense of conscious guilt, still we may call to mind that the Spirit of grace is ready to plead for us, and we may come with freedom before the great Hearer of prayer.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRAYER FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT.

We have been contemplating the assistance in prayer which christians receive from the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is not always poured upon the soul, and to be deserted by the Spirit of God is one of the most deplorable effects of sin. "Woe also unto them," said God, "when I depart from them." Hosea ix. 12. There is therefore much propriety in praying for the Holy Spirit; that God may continue to us those influences of the Spirit which renew and sanctify the soul, and form it meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. This whole subject will open readily upon us as we consider the four following questions, viz:

What is it to have the Spirit? How may we provoke him to withdraw from us? What are the usual signs of his withdrawment? and what are the consequences thereof?

The work of the Holy Spirit upon the minds

of those who are made the subjects of renewing grace is variously described in the scriptures. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, calls it a sealing: "In whom [*i. e.* in Christ] after that ye believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit." Eph. i. 13. This metaphor conveys a very striking idea of the operations of the Spirit upon the renewed soul. As a seal stamps its own image on the wax that is impressed by it, and thus marks the thing sealed to be the property of him who sealed it; so the Holy Spirit forms the lineaments of the divine image on the soul that is sealed, showing that it belongs to God.* The Spirit of God, then, when it dwells in the heart, forms the man in some measure like God; and hence it is called by the apostle in another place, "Renewed in knowledge, after the image of him that created him." Col. iii. 10. Thus, having the Spirit of God is to have his image created anew in the soul. It is to be in our measure like Christ; to possess something like his trust in God, his humility of soul, his zeal for God's honour, his fervency in prayer, and his desire for the salvation of men.

Our second inquiry is concerning the manner

* Simeon nearly.

in which the Spirit may be provoked to withdraw from men. Although he will not withdraw wholly and for ever from any who are truly converted, yet the people of God may, by sinning, lose the comforting influences of the Spirit, and become dull, and heartless, and barren, and very probably lose the evidences of their gracious state which they may have enjoyed before. In this way the Spirit may be grieved and provoked to withdraw for a time even from real christians. It is therefore a matter of much consequence that we should know how the Spirit is provoked to withdraw, that we may avoid grieving that heavenly messenger.

1. All open acts of transgression grieve the Spirit, and provoke him to withdraw from the soul. The good Spirit will not abide with the evil one, and when we open the door to sin we do in effect turn holiness out. Satan would be very glad of a compromise, but God will bear no rival in the heart. There can be no communion between light and darkness, no concord between Christ and Belial. Hence

2. The Spirit is provoked to withdraw by any attempt to reconcile the love and service of Christ with that of the world. This is sometimes done by real christians. In some sit-

uations, and at some times, the cross may seem very heavy, and men will hesitate about taking it up. Strict religion may be out of fashion, and a temporizing spirit may induce them to relax a little, and partially conform to the world. One step aside makes way for another, and this for a third, till at length the Spirit is grieved, and withdrawing leaves the soul dark and comfortless.

3. Nearly allied to this is another thing which grieves the blessed Spirit, viz : unnecessary intercourse with worldly people. Scarce anything chills the spirit of religion like it. It is like an untimely frost on the half matured crop, which nips the corn in the ear, and disappoints the husbandman of the expected fruit of his labours. So fatal to piety is too much worldly intercourse. There is indeed a connection with the world that is unavoidable as long as we live in it; but we have no need to seek our enjoyment here; we have no need to run among the giddy multitude, entering into their views, adopting their practices, and having our conversation always among them.

> "The world's infectious : few bring back at eve
> Immaculate the manners of the morn."

When we follow the world, adopt its maxims,

and copy its example, the warm flame of devotion is stifled, and the Spirit, offended, withdraws to seek a more congenial residence.

Such are some of the ways by which the Spirit is grieved and provoked to depart from the soul.

A third inquiry proposed was to speak of the signs of the Spirit's withdrawment. While there is in the soul an increasing sense of sinfulness, and the heart is weighed down and humbled before God, there is good reason to hope that the Spirit is still present, and is operating upon the heart, and teaching it to pray. Then the conscience will be tender, and the man will fear in all things, lest he should overstep the mark, and offend God. But when the Spirit withdraws, the very contrary to this will appear. The man will become very confident of his good estate; he will have no doubt but that he is a christian, and will feel rather offended to be doubted by others, or treated as a backslider. Declensions in religion always begin in the closet, and a man may decline a great way before any one becomes alarmed for him. But the all-seeing eye of God notices his backslidings. He does not pray as much as he used to; he does not search the scriptures as he once did; nor does he sit

solemnly down to meditate on the things of God. But he is worldly, and God, and Christ, and the things of religion occupy but a secondary place. Where these signs appear, we may be quite certain that religion is low, and the Spirit has withdrawn.

As a fourth question we proposed to inquire into the consequences of grieving the Spirit till he should withdraw from us. These consequences may be traced in the church as a body, or in individuals in particular. When the Spirit departs from a church, the members will become remiss in duty; matters of form will be regarded more than the grand essentials of religion; discipline will be neglected, and offences tolerated; the spirit of prayer will depart, and converting work will be at a stand. All the forms of religion may be retained, but an icy coldness will pervade the exercises, and no unction will attend them. Thus the external may be fair, but "Ichabod, the glory is departed," will be written on everything, 1 Sam. iv. 21, 22.

The departure of the Spirit from an individual may be traced in much the same way, though perhaps more distinctly. You saw the man when in the love of his espousals, and you noticed how his heart was overflowing

with love to God, and his fellow-men; you saw his seat in the sanctuary always filled, and if you missed him from the place of public worship on the Sabbath, you might be certain that he was sick, or that some unforeseen providence detained him; you found him also at the meeting for social prayer, with his heart full of love to God and man, and ready at all times to speak of the things pertaining to eternal life. But the Spirit has been grieved away, and has withdrawn, at least, for a time, and what a change has come! The man is cold and spiritless; his life is like that of the world; he thinks of the world, and he talks of the world. He may be attentive to outward duties, but the world has his heart. All these things being considered, we cannot but perceive the vast importance of praying for the Holy Spirit, and every christian viewing the matter aright will adopt, as his own, the prayer of David: "Take not thy Holy Spirit from me." Psalm li. 11. All the comfort of religion in the soul, all the growth in grace, all the increase of divine knowledge, depends on the influences of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, of immense consequence that this sacred messenger should not depart from us, for so certainly as this takes place we shall

become cold and languid in religion, dull and spiritless in all holy duties, and if we do not actually make shipwreck of the faith, and lose our souls, we shall make a halting, irregular pace, walk under a cloud all our days, have little or no comfortable communion with God, and perhaps die at last in a dark and doubtful state. So important, therefore, it is to us personally, that we should pray for the influences of the Holy Spirit, that our own souls may not only live before God, but thrive and flourish like a watered garden. And what a melancholy state would the church be in, if God should withdraw his Spirit! The spirit of prayer would depart, the members would become remiss in duty, offences and alienations would creep in, discipline would be neglected, and very little difference would be perceived between the church and the world. And if such would be the effects of the withdrawment of the Spirit from individuals, and from the church, much more dreadful would be the effect should he altogether withdraw from the world. There can be no true conversion without the aid of the Holy Spirit. The wicked will continue to do wickedly, and the scorners delight in scorning, and fools hate knowledge, "until the Spirit be poured upon us from on

high." Isaiah xxxii. 15. How important then, that we lift up a living cry to the Lord, that he take not his Holy Spirit from us, lest men harden in sin, and perish in their own deceivings!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HEARER OF PRAYER.

Among the excellent characteristics ascribed to Jehovah, in the scriptures, is that of a Hearer of prayer. The thought of praying without being regarded is disheartening, but as we can think of Jehovah regarding our prayers, receiving and answering them, we are encouraged to present our requests, adopting as our own the language of the psalmist, "O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come." Psalm lxv. 2.

That God hears prayer may be argued, very conclusively, from the fact of his omniscience, and his omnipresence. Where is he? Or rather where is he not? If we ascend up to heaven, he is there seated in glory; if we descend to the regions of woe, his power and his vengeance follow us; and if we take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth or sea, the Spirit of the Lord would still be present to inspect

all our ways. Psalm cxxxix. 7—10. This great truth, that God is always present, we probably all believe. But how is it? Is he present with every one, and in every place? and does he hear every prayer of every saint? There are thousands engaged in prayer in different places, at the same moment. Does he hear them all? Why not? He is infinite. The ingenuity and invention of man has done great things in former times, and continues to do so up to this day, and cannot Jehovah do more?

As an illustration of this subject, we will consider for a moment a single modern invention of man, the magnetic telegraph. By this truly wonderful machine information is communicated to distant points in the space of a few moments. What an advance is here upon all former inventions! The wing of the carrier pigeon, the fleetness of the horse, the rapidity of the wind, and even the terrible energy of steam, are all now superseded by the lightning. What a messenger is this! Yet novel and perfect as this mode of communication may appear, it has a rival, and one of no modern invention—the ability of God to hear and answer prayer; not a *magnetic* but a *spiritual* telegraph, and which far outstrips the present mode of communication among men. We

said it was no modern invention. It is true, for it is as old as the world. It was familiar to the first man. It has been employed for centuries by ancient patriarchs, and prophets, and kings, and has been in constant operation from that time to this. This medium of communication is the most perfect imaginable. The communication is between heaven and earth; One terminus is in this lower world; the other is at the throne of God. Altogether unlike the human machine, no accident can disarrange it, and no malevolence sever it; and it operates with a swiftness wholly unknown to the machinery of earth, conveying a thought, a wish, or a groan, from the most dismal dungeon or cavern on earth, instantly into the ear of God. And it conveys not words only, but impressions, emotions and feelings; and even a desire conceived in the heart of a man is instantly made known to God. And there is one thing very peculiar about it, it has a terminus on every spot in the world where there is found a praying soul. The terminus is in every renewed heart. The converted Hottentot, the Esquimaux, the Indian, the African, the polished European, the Asiatic, the Barbarian, the Scythian, the bond, and the free, may all at the same time be in

communication with the high and mighty Ruler of the universe, who, without any confusion, hears every request, every complaint, every confession.* Such is the wonderful communication between the heart of the contrite and the bosom of his God. Is not God a Hearer of prayer? The fact that God hears prayer is full of encouragement to the disconsolate soul. When the soul is made to understand that God hears prayer, and truly believes that there is a throne of grace, he will repair thither. As naturally as a child will go to its parent in distress, because he knows the parent is ready to hear him, just so readily does the pious soul repair to the mercy-seat. He knows that God is there; he believes the declarations of the scriptures to this effect, and repairs at once to the place where he can meet his God.

The fact that God hears prayer not only encourages our approach to him, but induces the soul to make a full disclosure of all its wants. How readily did Abraham, when pleading for Sodom, go out into particulars before God! He felt that he was in the presence of a Hearer of prayer, and that his requests would not be

* See an article on the Telegraph in the Presbyterian for Aug. 8th., 1846.

lost, and this consideration encouraged him to prefer all his wants, and, without reserve, to disclose before God every wish of his heart. Just as the child who knows that his father is listening to his requests with a heart overflowing with love, will come to him with most ample statements of his wants; so the praying soul will come before his heavenly Father in view of his readiness to hear and answer prayer.

The fact that God hears prayer, produces in the soul the greatest confidence and reliance upon him. Would the father encourage the approach of the child, and listen to his requests in detail without intending to grant relief? Certainly not. So at once the soul argues in prayer, and with the greatest confidence relies on God. So did Moses, when pleading for rebellious Israel. So did Samuel, when he cried unto the Lord all night: and so did David, when he sat before the Lord, making his prayer unto the God of his salvation. And so has every saint from that day to this. The consideration that he is not addressing a senseless idol, but is preferring his requests before a living God, and pouring out his desires into the ears of one who hears every request, and notices every sigh of the contrite heart; yea, be-

fore whom a book of remembrance is written for those that even think upon his name; Malachi iii. 16; the consideration of this will infallibly produce confidence in God, and the believing soul will quietly rest upon him.

Thus is God a Hearer of prayer, and these that we have now named, are some of the advantages arising from that relation. How excellent is the privilege of prayer when we know that God hears it! There is not a sigh nor a groan bursting from a contrite heart, but it instantly enters into the ears of the Lord. No bolts nor bars can shut him out, nor is any cavern so deep, nor any wilderness so dark as to exclude him; nor yet is any trouble too mighty for him to allay. How excellent, we repeat it, is the privilege of prayer! If God did not hear, the case would be altered. If, like the priests of Baal, we must call from morning to noon, while there was none to hear, nor any that regarded, 1 Kings xviii. 26, there would be reason for restraining prayer. But it is not so. Jehovah hears the cry of the humble, and listens to the groaning of the prisoner.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PRAYER ANSWERED.*

When the christian presents his supplications before the mercy-seat, and lifts up his prayer unto the God of his life, his most ardent desire is that he may be heard and answered, and scarce anything is more distressing than an apprehension that his cries are disregarded. Hence we find the cry of the psalmist, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness answer me, and in thy righteousness." Psalm cxliii. 1. And on another occasion we find him crying out, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call, answer me speedily." Psalm cii.

* For many ideas in this Chapter, and some of the language, the author is indebted to Phillip's "Devotional Guide." But the selections are so made, and the language so changed, that quotation marks are omitted.

1, 2. And it was the apprehension of not being heard in prayer, which drew forth the distressing complaints of the weeping prophet, "He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. Also, when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer." Lam. iii. 7, 8. So trying it is to the humble soul to doubt its interest at the throne of grace. But how may we know that our prayers are answered? for we may be assured that God does hear and answer prayer.

1. The christian may conclude that his prayers are answered when he is kept in a prayerful frame. This evidence of answers to prayer, though often overlooked and underrated, is not a small matter. A "spirit of supplication," is a "spirit of grace," Zech. xii. 10, however low the delight and joy that may accompany it. When the prophet declared, "I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face," Isaiah viii. 17, it was quite as decisive a proof of a state of grace, as when the psalmist declared triumphantly, "I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications." Psalm cxvi. 1. And, if anything, more so, as it is an evidence of stronger affection, and is expressive of a de-

termination to cleave to the Lord, even in a time of darkness and despondency. So that we may very safely conclude that the man who cannot give up prayer, but continues to call upon God, is not an unconverted man. His continued desire for the things of God furnishes evidence that he is a child of God, and hence that his prayers are heard.

2. When we can discern in ourselves an increasing love to the truth, we may take it as an evidence that God has heard our prayers. Naturally, no man loves the humbling doctrines of the cross; and although a man may be rationally convinced of the truth, and feel obliged to admit that such and such things are really taught in the Bible, yet to love these truths, and to feel our affections clinging to them, is quite another thing. David could say, "O how love I thy law: it is my meditation all the day!" Psalm cxix. 97. Yet David did not naturally love God's law any more than another man, and the fact that his affections were now placed on it, was a powerful evidence that he was a changed man, and that God was answering his prayers. We may judge thus in regard to any one. Should we find any man acknowledging, and cordially loving all the great truths which exalt God

and debase the creature, we should say at once, this must be a changed man, for he now loves the great and distinguishing truths of revelation, as no unconverted man ever does. He must be a child of God.

3. Conscientiousness, exercised in regard to those tempers and habits which are opposed to godliness, is a good evidence of such a change as clearly implies receiving answers to prayer. Joy in God, assurance of his love, and great serenity of mind, are much to be desired, but they are not any more valuable than self-abasement, self-control, and self-distrust; and perhaps the very answers to our prayers are granted in an increase of humility, and a godly jealousy over ourselves. We go and pray to God for an increase of faith, and perhaps he sends some sharp trial which humbles us before him, and excites great searchings of heart. Here then we have an answer to our prayers, though perhaps not in such a way as we thought.

4. We may consider our prayers as favourably answered when we are preserved from tormenting fear, and despair of salvation. We believe the revelation which God has given concerning the doom of the finally impenitent, and yet we have some little confidence towards

God, and some trembling hope of final salvation. Our hope may be neither strong nor steady, and it may be mingled with much misgiving of mind; but it is still very different from despair. A very faint hope is better than none at all, and no man should despair utterly, though he may have some misgivings, and though much obscurity may still rest on his spiritual vision. The ordinary tone of mind in a growing christian is rather calm than otherwise, and it should be deemed more satisfactory to be found quietly trusting in God, than to be in ecstasies. Trust in God is an evidence that the heart is right, and may be considered as a proof that God has answered our prayers.

5. If we can find in ourselves a desire for greater degrees of holiness, and more entire conformity of heart and life to God, we may hope that the great Hearer of prayer has bowed his ear to our supplications, and granted us answers of peace. A desire for holiness is a permanent principle in the christian's heart. Adversity does not overthrow it; prosperity tries it, but it is not overcome; it may fluctuate, but it does not expire. Human nature, left to its own tendencies, never produces such a state of mind as this. It is not the tendency of human nature to produce a love to holiness,

nor yet a love of obedience to God's requirements. It is impossible that it should do so, for the stream can never rise higher than the fountain. Therefore a real desire for holiness is an evidence of true religion, and is a proof that God hears and answers our prayers.

Should the inquiry arise in any mind how prayer is answered, it may be remarked that it is not by any new revelation. This we are not to expect. We already have in the Bible the only revelation that we are ever to look for. But the truths which are revealed may become more vivid, making a deeper impression on the mind; and as the pious soul lifts up its cries to God, and spreads out its requests before the mercy-seat, he must not expect to hear a voice calling to him from heaven, nor to have some remarkable dream, nor to see a vision; but his mind will be enlightened in relation to the scriptures, and the revelation already made will come with light and comfort to his soul. Thus does God answer the prayers of his people.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRAYING MAN.

In the preceding chapters, after a brief definition of the great duty of prayer, we have attempted an analysis of that form of prayer which our Lord taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's prayer; and then considered the duty as performed in the closet, in the family, in the social meeting, and in the public sanctuary. The power of prayer was then stated; its leading arguments adduced; its importunity considered; its continuance suggested; and its immediate performance urged. It was shown that the duty had respect to every matter, and that prayer should be offered for temporal blessings, as well as for those which are spiritual. Prayer in the name of Christ was considered; together with a description of the assistance of the Spirit in prayer; and then was shown the importance of prayer for the Holy Spirit; concluding the discussion, thus far, by exhibiting some evi-

dence that God both hears and answers the prayers of his people.

It is proposed in this closing chapter to illustrate the whole by an example of the PRAYING MAN.

In looking into the Bible for an example, we have selected that of Jabez, as furnishing one of the brightest. "And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow. And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh, that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me. And God granted him that which he requested." 1 Chron. iv. 9, 10. The account here given of Jabez is introduced in the midst of a genealogy of names, but has no connection either with what precedes or with what follows it. We know nothing of his parentage, or of his family, or even of the age in which he lived. At the time the chronicles of Israel were arranged, the Jews might not have wanted information respecting Jabez, but to us there is no account given save what we have in the text just recited. Even his name is not mentioned in any other place in

the Bible. He may have been a very rich man, or he may have been a very poor man; he may have been learned, or he may have been ignorant; he may have been a man in authority, or he may have been trampled down in the dust. One striking characteristic is given of him, and but one, and that is that he was a man of prayer, and no doubt it was declared of him in this respect that he was more honourable than his brethren. Herein, most probably, his eminency appeared; divine grace had qualified him above others: his brethren may have done virtuously, but he excelled them all. Solomon says that "the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour," Prov. xii. 26, and when we consider the high and holy motives by which the good man is swayed, the pure desires by which he is actuated, the good he endeavours to perform, the service he would render to God and men, as well as the heaven of glory to which he aspires, we may see that all serve to exhibit the true greatness of his character, and prove the pious, praying man, to be in reality more excellent than any wicked, worldly man, however distinguished in other things. Jabez was such a man, and therefore was more honourable than his brethren. He was perhaps an obscure man, for

none of his achievements are recorded, except his prayers, but in this he was a genuine son of Jacob, who wrestled in prayer until he obtained a blessing. From a full heart he earnestly entreated the God of Israel to bless him indeed, neither sending him away empty, nor putting him off with temporal mercies. And God heard him, and granted his request.

Several important matters may here be considered.

1. We should take notice of the Being to whom Jabez addressed his prayers. It was not to any idol god, neither to the host of heaven, but it is explicitly declared that he called on the God of Israel, the living and true God, who alone can hear and answer prayer. He prayed to a God in covenant, called the God of Israel, by way of eminence. This should be well considered when we pray. He that cometh unto God acceptably, must believe that he is, and who he is, and why we address him rather than another. We should endeavour to view him as sitting upon the throne, as ruling over the world, and disposing of everything according to the counsel of his own will, and yet a God of condescending mercy, hearing the prayers of his people, and bowing his ears to the cry of the most needy.

Thus he who prays acceptably, as did Jabez, will, like him, address the God of Israel.

2. We should take notice of the nature of Jabez's prayer; "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed!" or as it might very properly have been expressed, If thou wilt bless me indeed, putting it in the form of a covenant, or solemn vow, commencing the sentence but not filling it out. This directs us to the spirit with which we should offer our prayers. We must not come to the throne of grace with a spirit of dictation, but rather supplicating the divine mercy with a spirit that would put a blank into the hand of God, leaving it to divine wisdom and goodness to fill up the lines as it may seem good to him. Such was the prayer of Jabez. We should notice

3. The peculiar excellency of this prayer.

It was very *humble* prayer. Jabez evidently felt his entire dependence on God, and addressed him in the most beseeching manner: "Oh that thou wouldest bless me!" Such humility is always necessary to render prayer acceptable, for the more we abase ourselves, the more will God exalt us.

The prayer of Jabez was very *direct*. He did not content himself with general petitions; he did not go round about the subject in hand

without coming to the point; but he stated his wants to God in a distinct manner. So should we do. Not that God needs information respecting our wants, or that he will hear us for our much speaking, but we should recite our wants distinctly before God in order to impress our own minds with a sense of our utter helplessness, as well as our unworthiness of the least special favour.

The excellency of the prayer of Jabez further appears in that it was *importunate*, and was enforced by a very earnest plea. He wished to be kept from evil. Sin is a most bitter and grievous thing, and they who indulge it will find that though it may seem delightful for a moment, yet at the last it will bite like a serpent and sting like an adder. We should therefore, like Jabez, pray to be kept from sin, desiring that God would lay his restraints upon us, and keep us from running in the way of evil men.

The prayer of Jabez was *believing* prayer. Most evidently he trusted in God, and his prayer being offered in faith, received an answer of peace. So our Lord promised his disciples, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." Matt. xxi. 22.

Thus we see the excellency of the prayer

of Jabez: it was humble, and direct, and importunate, and it was offered in faith. No wonder that prayer, possessing such qualities, should be successful. It would have been strange should it have been denied.

4. We should further notice the subject matter of Jabez's prayer. There were four principal things for which he prayed.

1. He prayed for God's blessing: "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed!" It is altogether probable that he had an eye to the spiritual blessings which God had promised to Abraham, and to his seed. When God entered into covenant with the father of the faithful, he repeatedly promised, saying, "Blessing I will bless thee," and from age to age those who possessed the spirit of Abraham, desired above all things to be interested in those spiritual blessings which were promised him. These, doubtless, were the blessings which Jabez desired, and the blessings which we should desire if we would pray like him. The blessings which God bestows are real things, for he can give of his grace, and add no sorrow therewith. Here, then, is an example for us to follow. When we are alone with God, and are bowing our knees at the mercy-seat, we should desire above all things those blessings which

are spiritual, which God alone can bestow, and which can permanently satisfy the soul.

2. Jabez desired of God that he would "enlarge his coast." It is quite probable that this originally referred to the time when the people of Israel were endeavouring to subdue the land of Canaan, and possess it. But it may be spiritually understood as a desire to have our hearts subjugated by the grace of God, and in this way to have our portion in the heavenly Canaan enlarged. We are frequently reminded in the scriptures, that if we would possess much of spiritual things, we must desire much. "Open thy mouth wide," said God, "and I will fill it." "According to thy faith, be it unto thee," said our Lord. And the apostle sharply rebuked those who did not enlarge their desires for spiritual mercies, saying, "Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels." 2 Cor. vi. 12.

Hence, if we would pray as Jabez did, we must enlarge our hearts, desiring much of God, believing at the same time that he can do exceeding abundantly above that we are able to ask or think.

3. Another striking petition in the prayer of Jabez was, that God's hand might be with him. There was much wisdom in this prayer

in his case, and it is equally so in ours. Naturally, we are very weak and feeble, and have very little strength to resist the enemies who come against us to prevent our entrance into heaven; and should God abandon us to our own wisdom and strength, we should utterly fail of salvation. Hence the importance of the petition that God's hand might be with us, for nothing can stand before him, and what he undertakes will be accomplished.

4. Jabez prayed that God would keep him from evil. It was a petition somewhat similar to the petition in the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The evil of sin, the evil of temptations and trials, are constantly besetting our path, so that we need the guidance of the Lord, as well as the support and protection of his mighty arm.

We have thus very briefly considered the Being to whom Jabez addressed his prayer, together with its nature, its excellency, and its subject matter. It remains to speak of the issue of his prayer. He did not pray in vain. As he addressed a living God, he was heard and answered. It is expressly said, "And God granted him that which he requested." We have no detailed account of God's kindness to Jabez, but we are simply told that he re-

ceived all he asked for. If Jabez was not straitened in asking, we may be sure that he received a great abundance of spiritual blessings, for God is never straitened or impoverished in giving. The fact that Jabez received all he prayed for, is a most encouraging one to every praying soul. Whatever he asks in faith he receives. The more we abound in petition, the more we shall receive from the hand of the Lord. The praying soul will be replenished with good.

Such was the praying man, and such it is both our duty and our best interest to become. And what encouragement does this concise history afford us! Jabez, as a descendant of fallen Adam, was a child of wrath even as others. But divine grace renewed his heart, and he became eminently a man of prayer. We know not that he was distinguished for anything else, as nothing is said of his learning, his wealth, or of his rank in society, but only of his prayers, and in this respect he was remarkable, for like Jacob, probably his great progenitor, he had power with God as a prince and prevailed. Many and great are the blessings which we need from God, and the throne of his grace is always open to us. We may therefore take encouragement to approach him

as a God reconciled in Christ Jesus, and ready to receive the petitions of every humble, fervent, praying soul, and to grant them answers of peace, for God never will say to any such soul, "Seek ye my face, in vain."

Reflecting on the character of Jabez, the praying man, we cannot fail to see that honour and distinction are very differently estimated in God's sight from what they are in the sight of man. The men who are brave, and wealthy, and who make a stir and a display in the world, are considered great and honourable among their fellows. But God sees differently, and places a far higher value on humble piety than on worldly distinctions, and considers him only as truly great who is a man of prayer. We are also reminded in the example of Jabez, that we go about our proper work in a proper manner, only when we seek God's blessing on what we do, by fervent prayer. Every work of our hands should be brought to God, and laid down in the light of his countenance; and if we are doing anything on which we cannot honestly ask God's blessing, we may rest assured that work is sinful.

Finally. The whole subject which has been passing before us, will suggest not only the duty, but the manifold advantages of present-

ing all our desires before the throne of mercy; and though we may be small, and obscure, and overlooked in the world, and not distinguished by anything among men, yet we should aim to be distinguished before God as men of prayer. Nothing should be thought too small or too great to ask of God, and our prayers, like those of Jabez, should be daily recorded in heaven. While the pressure of our wants drives us to the throne, and the richness of our prospects allures us to the mercy-seat, let us honour God by fully expecting the accomplishment of his promises, and in due time our requests will be granted, and our prayers will be turned into everlasting praises.

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